

Lilith

Independent, Jewish & frankly feminist

FAMILY SECRETS

Agency Schwartz
discusses her identity

GOOD GRIEF!

Throwing a
Tribes-a-thon shiva

YOUNG LATINAS IN NEW YORK

Her new Jewish
immigrant experience

GOOD FOR THOUGHT

Essays on sensuality, humor,
guilt, love, shame, power,
memory, gluttony and delight

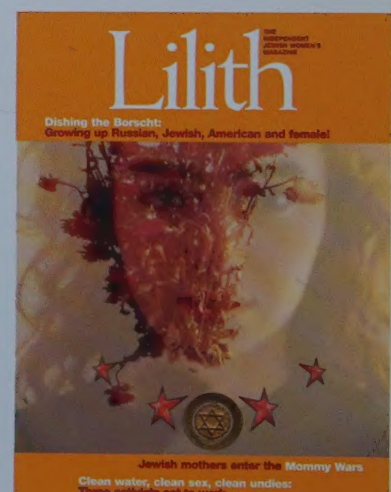
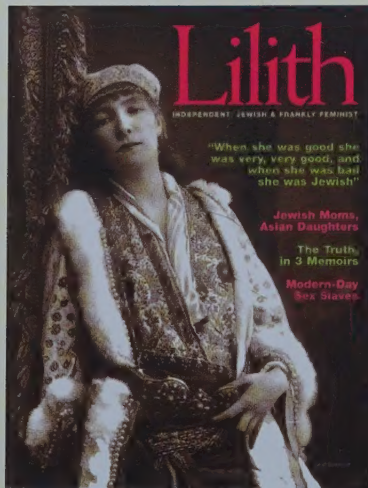
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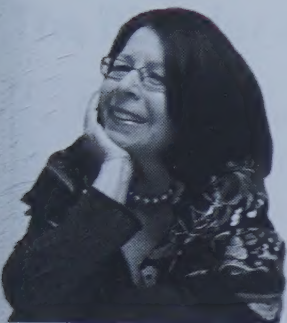
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Lilith

independent, Jewish & frankly feminist





I'VE JUST COME FROM A FAMILY REUNION WITH KIN WHOSE AGES RANGE FROM 8 MONTHS TO 98 YEARS. While the connections were pure pleasure, still I'm left uneasy—forced to revise some longstanding assumptions. A small but telling example: In one of those interstitial conversations that work their way into

reunions, I learned that in 1904 my Aunt Ann, oldest child of seven and responsible daughter to her widowed father, declined when her father encouraged her to go to university. "I was having too much fun!" she told her granddaughter decades later.

Why do I find this apparently trivial piece of information—that a respected family matriarch had cared about fun—unsettling? When you consider how little we know about what drives even our closest contemporaries, it should be no surprise that we know next to nothing about the inner workings of women from preceding generations. Did Aunt Ann talk over her decision with her first cousin Dorothy, who lived next door and slept over almost every night? Was Ann's father disappointed that his smart and capable eldest was so cavalier? Did it matter anyway, since she was a girl in a generous family that, nonetheless, passed business opportunities only along the male line? (The family wholesale grocery firm, pickled herring its specialty, was, after all, *Weidman Bros.*—italics added)



The descendants of the Bros.—180 of them—came lemming-like to Winnipeg in June to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the 1882 arrival there of my great-grandparents and their sons. We know plenty about the men, since there are loving testimonials and tender eulogies and business records of all sorts attesting to their occupation, loyalties and good deeds. And the brothers—warmhearted, learned, community-minded men—even kept a joint record of the trip they took in 1923 to visit the graves of their parents on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives. (Those intrepid great-grandparents had settled the family in Winnipeg and then, in 1904, made aliyah to Eretz Israel.) The sons revisited Bialystock and their old yeshiva, then traveled, via Egypt to see the pyramids, to pre-state Israel. Their observations on kibbutz life and their conversations with Rav Kook, chief rabbi of Eretz Israel, are all recorded for posterity in a small printed

volume—English on one side, Yiddish on the other. The diary is so endearing in part because its details enable us, the family that followed, to see Mordecai and Haim Leib as individuals.

So I feel all the more bereft that we have no parallel information about their mother and their wives, daughters and daughters-in-law.

My own mother did leave some writing—a few essays and some short fiction. Other women left letters. But no journals or diaries; mostly just the outer trappings of their lives. A piece of jewelry. A wedding veil. A handmade shawl. Treasure-troves of photograph albums from the 1890s onward—Aunt Millie in her full-length tennis dress, Millie with Uncle John on board ship

Photo albums and family trees, but what were our female forebears thinking?

sailing to Europe between the wars (seeking help, a cousin suggests, for their inability to conceive). What was Millie thinking as she smiled for the camera? Why did my great-grandmother depart the Canadian prairie for the Holy Land in 1904? There's no way to know now. We have objects and recipes, photos and a family tree for the public facts of these lives, but not enough words to reveal what thoughts prefaced these actions.

The fallout from having too little information is a tendency to smooth out individual differences and imagine all women to have been cut from the same shtetl tablecloth. As a consequence, we're unable to conjure our female forebears in all their resplendent specificity.

I knew Aunt Ann as the adored older sister who raised my dad after his mother died and as the name behind her signature oatmeal-coconut cookies, her life a familiar trope—I thought. To recast Ann as a dance-happy partygoer required the same mental shift as when I recently saw a very poised and elegant young guest at a wedding take off her silk jacket, surprising me with a bare back completely covered in tattoos. I had pegged each of these women wrongly, as more ordinary than she really was, and each ultimately defied my easy categorization.

Projecting onto women a more sanitized persona than reality will bear doesn't serve us well. Such cleaned-up versions erase a woman's individuality, and thus mask the diversity that exists in our world. As regular readers of *Lilith* know well, women who are Jewish, by birth or by choice, come in all colors, ethnicities, nationalities, political tendencies and degrees of gleefulness. You'll meet several in this issue. It's time to get to those individualized and diverse life stories, told in images and words. Read on!

Susan

Susan Weidman Schneider
Editor in Chief

Our Right to Reproduce — or Not

“There is no such thing as partial birth abortion. The term will be found in no medical book. It was made up in 1995 by Douglas Johnson, legislative director for the National Right-to-Life Committee, and former U.S. Representative and current Florida appeals court judge Charles Canady explicitly to confuse, horrify, and deceive—to manipulate language with the intent of sensationalizing the abortion debate.”

Gloria Feldt, from the Reproductive Health Reality Check blog, April 19, 2007

On April 18, 2007, the United States Supreme Court handed down a five-to-four vote on a case known officially as *Gonzalez v. Carhart*. Among the dissenting Justices was **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**. In a highly unusual move, Justice Ginsburg read her dissent aloud. Here is some of what she said:

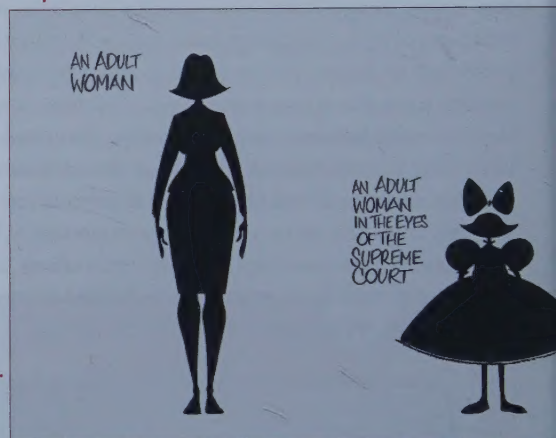
“Despite our unambiguous ruling [in *Stenberg v. Carhart* in 2000, which ruled that a Nebraska law making “partial birth abortion” illegal was unconstitutional], Congress passed the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act—without an exception for women’s health, a ban that would operate nationwide. After lengthy trials and thorough review of volumes of medical evidence, each of the District Courts to consider the statute found that it was unconstitutional for the same reason: Significant medical authority identified intact D&E as the safest procedure for some women.

The Court’s opinion tolerates, indeed applauds, federal intervention to ban nationwide a procedure found necessary and proper in certain cases by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. For the first time since *Roe*, the Court blesses a prohibition with no exception protecting a woman’s health.

The Court asserts that its ruling furthers the government’s interest in “promoting fetal life.” But the Act scarcely furthers

“We must consider again what it means when the self-described ‘moral concerns’ of five male Supreme Court justices can cast aside all women’s right to safety, respect for women as moral decision-makers and three decades of legal precedent.”

Phyllis Snyder, president of NCJW in a May 9 editorial in the JTA



Ann Telnaes for Women’s E-News

that interest, for it targets only a method of abortion. The woman may abort the fetus, so long as her doctor uses another method, one her doctor judges less safe for her. The Court further pretends that its decision protects women. Women might come to regret their physician-counseled choice of an intact D&E and suffer from ‘severe depression and loss of esteem’, the Court worries. Notably, the solution the Court approves is not to require doctors to inform women adequately of the different procedures they might choose, and the risks each entails. Instead, the Court shields women by denying them any choice in the matter. This way of protecting women recalls ancient notions about women’s place in society and under the Constitution—ideas that have long been discredited.

In candor, the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, and the Court’s defense of it, cannot be understood as anything other than an effort to chip away at a right declared again and again by this Court—and with increasing comprehension of its centrality to women’s lives.”

The Bind for a Political Mother



Ethel by Pablo Picasso

My father's parents were **Julius and Ethel Rosenberg**, executed in 1953 for stealing the secret of the atomic bomb and giving it to the Soviets. My grandparents were union activists and communists while the Red Scare had reached a fever pitch; it was an intensely political trial. My grandmother was arrested on flimsy evidence in an attempt to break Julius, who was refusing to name others or to indict himself. Both professed their innocence until the end. Her only crime, and I quote the documents, was that she was "highly developed politically."

Can these two identities—devoted mother and committed radical—be reconciled in a society and a Jewish culture in particular that believes them to be mutually exclusive? I have tried to explore this question in my film "Heir to an Execution" (2004, HBO Films).

We all know the ideal of the good mother as one who is so devoted to her children she "would die for them." Because Ethel is perceived as having died for "a cause," she challenges the very core of that ideal. She is seen as being willing to die and leave her children for a political stance, a principle, a belief system. Her death—and her life, for that matter—turns that entire notion of the devoted mother on its head. And what it has done to me, as a granddaughter and a filmmaker, is force me to defend her as both a mother and a political heroine. I've learned just how difficult that is, given our images of Jewish motherhood and motherhood in general. I've even had to prove it to myself.

I wanted to achieve a kind of redemption for Ethel in particular, since she was the one whose love was in question. Julius's never was, of course. I had to prove to the world that she was a good mother, that she loved and cared for my father and uncle very much [**Michael and Robert Meeropol**, adopted after their parents were executed].

As I worked on the film, I found myself craving those details that would confirm how much Ethel loved her kids. I included the scene where I visit my father's therapist to illustrate this point. The very fact alone that she went to the therapist to learn how to be a better mother for my difficult father is a revelation, especially given the dim view the Communist Party took of therapy. But I watch it now and see that it's not a particularly compelling scene, holds no great revelations, except to me it is pivotal as a reassurance that—yes—she was a mom who loved my dad. I too was afraid that Ethel did care more for her political beliefs than she cared for her children. That scene turns out to have been as much for me as it was for the audience.

IVY MEEROPOL (from remarks at an NYU conference on Jewish women in Postwar America, on a panel sponsored by the Jewish Women's Archive.)

After all the sex scandals involving Israeli political men, maybe the country's ready to put another woman in office. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, 'one of the few politicians who have escaped unscathed from Israel's ongoing self-critique following the war in Lebanon' [says the Christian Science Monitor] has emerged as a strong contender to become the next, and the second female, prime minister."

Rebecca Honig Friedman in a May 8 post on the Jewess blog (jewess.canonist.com)

CORRECTION: In **Barbara Gingold's** "Childless in Israel" (Spring 2007), the founder of the Bar Ilan Interdisciplinary Program in Gender Studies was incorrectly identified as **Tamar Ross**, who now heads it; the program was founded by **Dafna Izraeli**, who died in 2003 while serving as Chair.

Sex and Secrecy

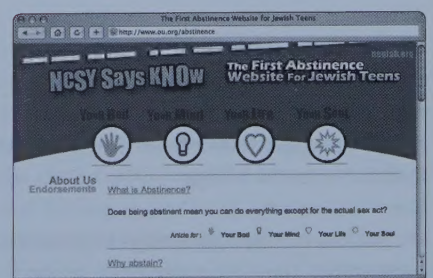
Honesty is always the best policy—unless, of course, you're talking about sex. The Orthodox Union (OU) has recently launched Negiah.org [*negiah* is Hebrew for touch], "the first abstinence website for Jewish teens." Its aim is to teach Jewish youth that "it's okay to say no." This may be a good thing in a hyper-sexualized secular society, but here the task is undertaken not through entirely honest means.

Although Jewish law prefers abstinence before marriage, Negiah.org focuses not on *halakha*, but on what it presents as medical facts. The website devotes an entire page to the health risks of every mechanical or pharmaceutical method of contraception, and implies that contraception mostly does not work. (No allegations are sourced, and they also happen to fly in the face of curricular recommendations from the American Medical Association and the Institute of Medicine).

Interestingly, the vocabulary of the website is somewhat, uh, sparse; "penis" and "vagina" are never named, though you will see "vaginal walls" in a section explaining how spermicides increase a woman's chances of getting HIV. (This claim also goes unattributed.)

The site is hosted by the OU and links to the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, which claims to be "at the forefront of the battle against assimilation." Sounding eerily like the Christian right is perhaps not the best battle plan.

MELANIE WEISS



Orthodox and Feminist: The Dreaded “F” Word

Lilith sent London-based writer Sally Berkovic and Melanie Weiss, Lilith's assistant editor, to cover the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance's 10th annual conference in New York. Given their contrast generationally, geographically (Sally flew in from the U.K.; Mel took the train from Brooklyn), denominationally (Sally identifies as Orthodox and Mel as Conservative—usually), and in previous attendance of JOFA conferences (Sally has been to them all, while this was Mel's first), they certainly had fertile ground for discussion. Here are their contrasting insights—as they discovered them through one another.

MELANIE WEISS: I know I'm biased, but I just want to start by saying that I can't imagine a conference like that taking place outside of New York. Do you think it would be possible in London?

SALLY BERKOVIC: Well, as far as Orthodox feminism is concerned, there is no defined movement in the UK, but there are a few of us who have discovered each other and network via e-mail and a meeting every couple of months. The JOFA conference is the reward for battling with these issues in isolation. It's just great to be in a room with a 1,000 women who don't think I'm crazy! There is definitely something comforting in discussing the challenges of Orthodoxy and feminism in an environment where you don't feel you have to apologize for grappling with how we view ourselves and how we relate to Judaism.

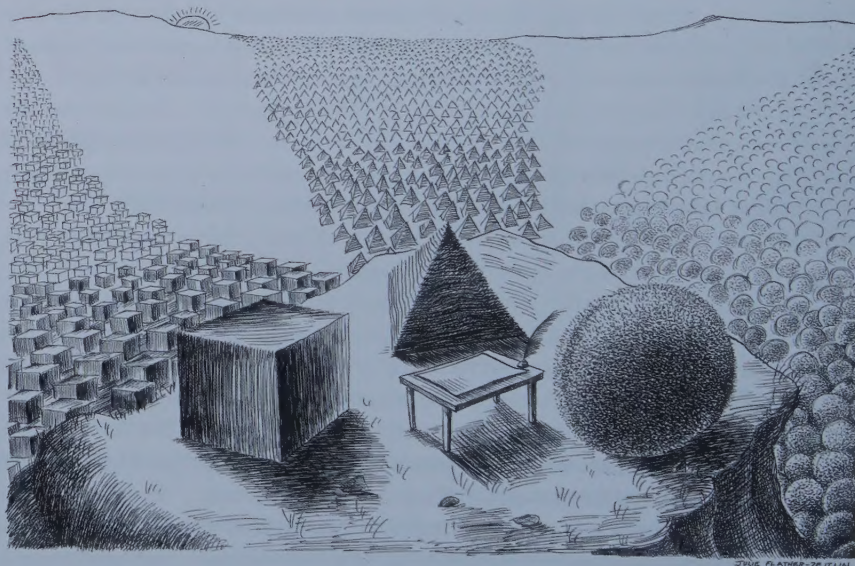
MW: As a Conservative Jew, I was impressed by the number of participants at the JOFA conference (clearly several hundred), which I don't think would happen if you called a feminist conference of another specific denomination. And as someone who is often one of the youngest representatives at anything featuring “the dreaded F word,” I was definitely impressed by the number of women younger than myself—as well as by their poise and energy.

SB: Yes, the numbers are always impressive. I remember the first conference in 1997;

well over a 1,000 people attended. The demographics of the conference have changed over the years. While I can't imagine men were officially excluded from the first conference, it certainly had the feel of a “women's conference,” with barely a man to be seen; this year it certainly felt as if a third of the participants were men. While I noticed a young crowd, I actually expected a much larger younger crowd—women in their 30s seemed absent to me. I know it's difficult for those with young families to attend Sunday events, but I wondered if it's more about lack of interest from the women in their 30s than logistical difficulties of attending. The women in their 50s and 60s

to be cancelled—and she called outright for an increase in women's political power. In fact, a lot of the conversation I had with Israeli-identified American expats touched on the connection between political and religious power in Israel—that the later is impossible without the former.

SB: I find the whole issue of agunot (women whose husbands won't give them a traditional Jewish divorce, preventing them from marrying again) utterly depressing. I have been to lectures where rabbis say “Oy, you have no idea—great rabbinical minds have been dealing with this issue—they don't sleep at night thinking about all the



are the real pioneers of the Orthodox feminist movement; many of their daughters seem not so engaged in the issues. They take so much for granted: women's tefillah groups, Talmud study for women and greater participation in ritual life, and are busy juggling demanding careers with their family responsibilities.

MW: I thought there was a lot of talk about women's power. I sat in on Sharon Shenhav's session about how and why the recent Agunot Conference came to be—and

women who are agunot!” They don't look so tired to me.

MW: And yet at JOFA you had Norma Joseph and Tova Hartman in the opening session calling for an end to the agunot crisis, and pretty much directing women to openly revolt—to refuse to allow their daughters to be married by Orthodox rabbis who are on the wrong side of the issue.

SB: Perhaps the modern Orthodox need to vote with their feet, and their pockets, more

rigorously. The arguments put forward by those you've mentioned are not mainstream—but if enough people were willing to stand by the lone voices of change, perhaps more would, in fact, change.

MW: Speaking of revolution, there seemed to be a lot of conversation, too—albeit very tentative, to my ears—about women's halakhic power, their power to really make decisions about Orthodoxy from the inside out. I was a little surprised.

SB: There *has* been a shift as more women have achieved greater levels of learning. It has become “normal” for a woman to study Talmud for several years and achieve proficiency in certain legal areas, enabling her to give learned opinions. Can you imagine that a generation or two ago?

MW: I was struck by how hard everyone was trying to provide a working definition of Modern Orthodoxy. Norma Joseph's call for the acceptance of a (more) diverse movement, all the discussion about finding a balance of respect and critical thinking—these are beautiful ideas. In fact, they're familiar ideas to me, as well—because they are also at the heart of the intense debates about the future of the Conservative movement. Weirdly, the JOFA conference made me realize how much there is in common between Modern Orthodox and Conservative Jews, and how sad it is that the squabbling, interdenominational political catfight helps keep us so far apart. Do you think feminism could act as a bridge?

SB: While it's clear that feminism has already helped build bridges between the two groups you mention, at the same time, it has fractured some of the bridges between the modern Orthodox and the more right-wing women who, in their own communities, have increased their educational opportunities and created strong support networks for other women. We risk alienating these women at our peril.

MW: And probably at theirs, too. It looks like we have our work cut out for us.

William and Karen Davidson have given Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America (WZOA) a gift of \$75 million.

Not only is this among the largest commitments ever made to a Jewish organization, it is may also be the largest gift ever to a women's organization. The contribution will support the new inpatient tower at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem, which will be named the Sarah Wetsman Davidson Tower, in memory of William Davidson's mother, a founder of the organization's Detroit chapter.

Fantasy Rabbinate

No one can deny that Jews and their rabbis have had a contentious relationship throughout the ages. Sometimes revered, sometimes condescended to, frequently ill-paid—it hasn't always been easy for rabbis. Now, however, they're getting their due. Well—sort of. Newsweek published a list this past April naming “The Top 50 Rabbis in America.” And while the title suggests the kind of definitive list often populated by sports heroes, the complicated algorithm by which these 50 were determined was... not quite that. **Michael Lynton**, **Gary Ginsberg** and **Jay Sanderson**, all high-powered men and co-authors of the list, admit in Newsweek that their system “though helpful, is far from scientific.” Derived mostly by a point system depending on such criteria as media presence, political influence and constituency size, the list reflects a value system that might not be universally subscribed to throughout the Jewish world, but no fear: the authors clearly sweated over their “labor of love” (they “revised and rejiggered” it for months). The list, which features five women amongst the rankings, has met mixed reactions, including the opinions of some who wonder why, with all that is going on in the world, Newsweek is concerned with the batting averages of American rabbis.

In response, feminist writer and activist **Letty Cottin Pogrebin** drew up her own stellar list, with gender proportions reversed. To read about the 45 women rabbis and five men she chooses, visit Lilith's blog at <http://www.lilith.org/blog>.

M.W.

Family for All Seasons

There is a stained glass window in the entryway of Congregation Tifereth Yakov with the words, "To Life From Ashes." Tifereth Yakov was founded by Holocaust survivors. The shul is part of The Four Seasons Lodge, a cooperatively run summer bungalow colony in Ellenville, New York. Congregants—almost all from Austria, Germany, Hungary and Poland—have, since 1980, held holiday and Shabbat services there. While The Four Seasons is loudly and proudly Jewish, cooperators define what that means for themselves. But everyone agrees: The Lodge is a place where survivors can relive the horrors they experienced at Nazi hands and, at the same time, savor their aliveness.

And savor they do. Every night but Friday there are games of canasta, mahjong and poker in the main lodge. "They're playing for money so there are arguments with voices raised," laughs **Ruth Bieber**, the daughter of a lodger and frequent visitor to The Four Seasons, but by the time cake and coffee are served, flared tempers are calmed.

At the height of its existence, nearly 100 couples vacationed at the Lodge. Today, all 52 bungalows and eight apartments are occupied, but declining health and death have taken their toll on the original group. Some of the bungalows have been rented by their owners, with tenants drawn largely from New York's survivor community. Whether hidden children or camp survivors, the Holocaust is the common denominator that links most of the residents to one another. Some first met in Europe, in their hometowns or in concentration camp. Others met in the U.S., but virtually all have been friends for decades.

Men are present at The Four Seasons too, but it is the women talking together that is most striking. "Life is tradition," adds **Helen** [who asked that her last name not be used] from the sidelines. "We've developed a Jewish life here. We also grew, as people." Like other residents, she repeats the word "family" again and again.

Carola Greenspan began coming to the Catskills nearly 60 years ago and calls the area her second home. She initially came as part of a pack: 15 families, all survivors living in Manhattan, drawn upstate for fresh air, camaraderie, and a safe place for their children to play. Many of that first group are now at The Four Seasons.

Carola's recollections of the Holocaust are vivid and raw, with astounding power and immediacy. "I was just a teenager," she says. "I was holding a six-year-old boy with meningitis in my arms. A soldier approached and the kid started to scream. The German took the boy from me, then threw him on a truck, like garbage. It's so difficult to believe, the atrocities. Our survival was miraculous. Here, at The Four Seasons, we all have the same background. Have all been through such things, such inhumanity. Most of us lost our entire families. So this is it. This is our family."

A new film on the Four Season Lodge is forthcoming; for more information go to www.fourseasonsmovie.org.

ELEANOR J. BADER



Lesbian Palestinians Using Their Voices

Aswat (Arabic for "Voices"), the organization that recently celebrated its fifth anniversary of activism on behalf of lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex Palestinians, is finally getting some recognition—although not all of it welcoming. Their recent conference was openly criticized by the Islamic Movement inside Israel, which condemned the group and called for the general population to do the same.

The creation of Aswat was made possible by the Internet, which allowed early members to create a website and email list from disparate locations, without having to travel or run the risk of incidental "outing"

that might arise from more public meetings. (Only one other similar organization—in Lebanon—is known to exist in the Arab world.) Although the group meets more regularly in person now, secrecy is a definite part of the undertaking. Many of Aswat's members are in the closet, at least in the public sphere or with families that might be unaccepting. For example, the staff page of Aswat's colorful website features only first names of each staff member, and there's a subset that participate in group meeting only by email.

One of Aswat's goals is to challenge what it sees as the "colorlessness" of

Jewish LGBTQI* groups—the lack of acknowledgement for how various ethnic and religious groups might choose to deal with queer issues in a patriarchal society. Although they have not yet collaborated with organizations like Open House, Jerusalem's gay and lesbian center, the experience of rejection—sometimes violent—is sadly familiar to both groups. Perhaps this shared experience will some day help build a bridge. That day, though, seems far off: the group assiduously avoids the word "Israel," and any future collaboration rests heavily on the political situation.

M.W.

*lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex

“According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, [soon] there will be only eight hospitals in Philadelphia that deliver babies, down from 19 a decade ago. Why? Because maternity care is a ‘money loser’. Yup. On May 31, Jeanes Hospital is closing its maternity ward, blaming ‘financial losses and a deluge of patients who might previously have gone to other, now-defunct, maternity wards’. That makes 11 Philadelphia hospitals that have closed their maternity wards over the past decade. Not to sound panicked or anything, but this seems pretty bad, no?”

Catherine Price, from a May 8 posting to the Salon.com blog, “Broadsheet”

“At some point in my service as an administrator [at Bryn Mawr], our Human Resources Office came up with the idea that we should have a team-building workshop for members of the senior staff. It was one of those affairs where you take the Meyers-Briggs test and do a variety of other exercises. This is not at all my kind of thing; indeed, I think it works best with people who have an under-developed sense of humor. Be that as it may, at one point we were asked to describe ourselves with three words. All of the others—and there were quite a few of us present, perhaps 30—chose personality adjectives: generous, shy, outgoing, demanding, etc. My own three words, which popped out completely spontaneously, were “New York Jew”—an echo of Kazin! The response was a moment of shocked silence. Clearly, my contribution was viewed as inappropriate and made everyone else in the room uncomfortable.

To me, however, it was the fullest, strongest and most informative description I could come up with in three words. Generally speaking, because I am a social scientist, I tend to think of identity in socio-cultural terms. But, to be honest, what I said was a boast, something I was proud of. I said it in just the way one might announce one’s membership in the royal family.”

Judith Shapiro, President of Barnard College, during a panel on “Bobby Socks and Bat Mitzvahs: Growing Up Jewish and Female in the 1950s,” sponsored by the Jewish Women’s Archive, part of a conference at NYU on “Jewish Women in Postwar America.”

A Hip-Hop Rap about the Shoah

It started as something entirely underground—a YouTube video teenagers sent around to one another. The allure, for those musically inclined to Jewish hip hop, was obvious: **Miri Ben Ari**, the Israeli performer known as the hip-hop violinist and whose recent work with stars like **Kanye West** and **Alicia Keyes** catapulted her into the mainstream American musical scene, teamed up with the artist known as **Subliminal**, generally credited with building an authentic Israeli rap scene. The product, a music video to the new song “Adon Olam, Ad Matai?” (“God Almighty, When Will It End?”) kicks off the duo’s new project: the Gedenk Movement. (“Gedenk” is Yiddish for remember.) Hoping to re-fashion Holocaust history as something more easily acces-

sible to today’s youth, Ben Ari and Subliminal (whose real name is **Kobi Shimoni**) have gone where few, if any, have gone before: they’ve created a hip-hop track about the Shoah. As the video has made its way through inboxes and blogs, there has been plenty of controversy, sometimes from unexpected places. Along with educators and institutions that are resistant to using hip-hop as a tool, many

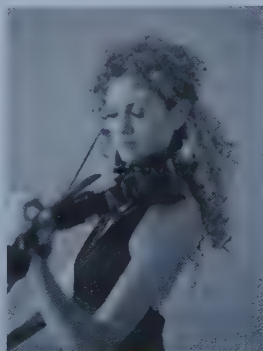
in the hip-hop community, including Israeli rapper **Sagol 59**, have criticized the music for being too slick and too obviously commercial (the song features such lyrics as “freedom vanished, but still there was hope/our spirit stirred deep in our hearts, our eyes looking towards Zion”).

The Gedenk Movement is dedicated to using “commercial outlets” to “make the Jewish Holocaust relevant to today’s youth,” but their website also mentions educating the general public about such atrocities as the Armenian genocide, 1990s Rwandan massacres, and today’s genocide in Darfur.

M.W.

To read more, watch the video and leave your comments, go to Lilith’s blog:

<http://www.lilith.org/blog>.



Miri Ben-Ari



Subliminal



LACEY SCHWARTZ OUTSIDE THE BOX

an interview with SUSAN WEIDMAN SCHNEIDER

"WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, PEOPLE WERE ALWAYS COMING up to me and asking, 'What *are* you?' Trying to fit me into a box. I just had the sense that other people—in particular black women in my school—resented me. That was the most negative feeling."

"Even in nursery school, one kid—and this is my strongest memory—said, 'Show me your gums. If they're white, you're white. If they're black, you're black.' I was *aware* of looking different."

"I felt a certain amount of responsibility to other people to give them an answer than made sense."

"When they asked, 'What are you?' I would answer, 'I'm Jewish'."

"*Now* when people ask, I answer, 'I'm mixed—half black, half white'."

The family snapshots and home videos that Lacey Schwartz shows on her website and in the trailer for her new film, "Outside the Box," confirm this. And they're wrenching. Not horrifying, but startling to watch, because she's a black kid in a white family and no one seems to know. Lacey Schwartz really does look like what she is: the mixed-race child of her white Jewish mother and a man with whom the mom had an affair in the early years of her marriage (Lacey's parents divorced when she was 16).

The clues were everywhere, though nobody in Lacey Schwartz's family was willing to read them. Her Bat Mitzvah pictures and even her baby pictures—all up on goldglassproductions.com—suggest a racial heritage so obvious that ignoring it must have taken energetic denial on the part of everyone near her.

Getting ready for Georgetown University at 18, she didn't check off any box for race—not even "other." Instead, she stapled a photo onto the application form, the school's cue to assign her to an African-American advisor, and an African-American student group. When she came home from her first year of college to the upstate New York town where she'd grown up, she asked her mom, "Why do *you* think I look the way I do?" Her mother revealed that her biological father is an African-American man who'd been at the periphery of Lacey's life growing up, a distant family friend. "I found out I was, in fact, black."

But the trail had always been there to follow. "When I was 15, I was sitting in synagogue and an old woman behind me kept reaching over to touch me. She was touching my hair, patting me, stroking me. And then she reached over and grabbed

my hand, and—I can still feel those dry, peeling lips—she kissed the back of my hand and said 'I'm so glad we have an Ethiopian Jew in our presence'."

What did Lacey do?

"I wheeled around to my mother beside me and said 'Change seats with me this minute'." But Lacey never discussed with her mother why the old woman—like some Greek chorus sent by the playwright—had confused the American teen with a rescued Ethiopian.

And then there was the time... "When I was in high school my mom took me and my friend Samara to the Meadowlands [an arena in New Jersey] for an all-day R&B concert. The place was packed, and about halfway through the day my mom says, 'Wow, Samara, you and I are the only two white people here'."

HER MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS NEVER ACKNOWLEDGED THAT she's bi-racial. And though Schwartz protects her father, and says they've never spoken about why she "looks the way" she does, even her available-to-all YouTube video, with its shots of her parents and grandparents, suggests that she knows he knows. When she says "my father," she means the dad who raised her; the other man she refers to as "my biological father" when she mentions him at all. Over the course of several conversations, she said of her dad, "Neither one of us has ever brought it up. I can only imagine how he may feel. I don't *know* how he feels. I love him, and he is my father, and I'm just in the process of figuring out what conversations I need to have to get on with my life—without separating myself out from my father and my mother. I feel sympathetic towards both of them, to be honest. But I'm the one who embodies this affair, embodies these secrets. I'm the one who still has to hide—who still carries these secrets."

Schwartz, now 30, is making a movie about her life. Part old family footage, part documentary on black Jews in America, and part— "It's tricky," she says often—uncensored therapy sessions as she tries to untangle the conundrums of her identity with the support of her white, female, not-Jewish therapist. "Outside the Box," a work still in progress, earned a 2006 All Access Creative Promise Award from Manhattan's Tribeca Film Festival. And now it's less sociological and more about Lacey Schwartz's own fraught journey.



On the trail of her identity as a mixed-race Jew, via a family secret

It's not the first time film has provided her a vehicle for some pointed observations. At Harvard Law School, she says she sometimes made a film in lieu of writing a paper for a class. One was "Schvartze"—"My name is Schwartz; it was a play on words," she said. Another was "Legally Black, Brown, Yellow & Red." She became involved in the Black Law Students Association and protested some of the school's policies.

"I was quoted in *The New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Associated Press*, about issues of race on campus; I was interviewed as a representative of the Black Law Students Association. Members of my family saw the press and mentioned it to my mother. *No one* talked about it to me.

"I got involved with the Black Entertainment and Sports Lawyers Association, BESLA, and I would tell my family I just was at an 'entertainment and sports lawyers association' conference. My race was the elephant in the room."

People who have heard Lacey's story at conferences, or who've seen the privately-circulated trailer for her film, have asked why she's not outraged at her family. "Have there been moments when I've been angry with my mother? Of course. But we've talked about it and worked through it. I think I'm relatively empathetic to people and their shortcomings. I mean, life is tricky."

JEWS OF COLOR—BLACK, ASIAN—HAVE OFTEN APPEARED IN *Lilith*, along with women who are mixed-race Jews. But Lacey's story is different, as she acknowledged when she said, after reading those earlier pieces, that she didn't entirely identify with them.

At 18, she said, "I found out three things. Everything I thought about my life changed.... I found out my mom had had an affair, my dad was not my biological father—and my biological father was black."

What does it mean to her to be Jewish and non-white, and to have come to this knowledge as a young adult?

"I FEEL A SENSE OF BELONGING NOW IN BLACK SETTINGS, black congregations—though the people who go to synagogue on Saturday morning are more religious than I am. In white communities, I often feel a bit different. The issue of someone 'passing', consciously or not, is partly whether someone *can*, whether other people will believe they are white. For me, I

can't. When I believed I was white and told people that, they never seemed to buy it."

"Reboot is the first Jewish community I ever had outside my family, since high school." She's referring to the diverse and eclectic organization of Jews, many of them in the arts, who, according to the Reboot website, gather to "understand generational changes in identity, community and meaning." A couple of years ago, Schwartz, though a friend, was invited to attend the group's annual "summit" in Colorado.

"All of a sudden I was in this community of people all of whom had a connection to being Jewish and all of whom were amazing. I loved it. I did not feel like a token—I felt like there was a lot I had in common with a lot of the people there. At Passover and other holidays I still go home to my family, I don't necessarily go to a Rebooters house, but it is a part of my life. It's inspiring to see other people trying to connect with their Jewish identity. It opens my mind up to different ways of being Jewish. It felt almost spiritual, reinventing ritual. It really touched me."

NOW, LACEY SCHWARTZ HAS BECOME SOMETHING OF A HOT property in the Jewish world. She said that "on a daily basis" she's dealing with aspects of the organized Jewish community. "Funding"—for completion of the film—"is how I originally got into it. Jewish people are very aware of issues of identity. Not diversity necessarily, but issues of identity and family and community."

But does race trump Jewish identity? "This changes for me. When I was in college and law school, the campuses were more segregated and racially charged. My black identity felt more pronounced than when I am living my life in New York. New York is a city where people mix. Nonetheless, when I'm in a setting of all white people I am often aware of being 'other'—whether they are aware of it or not. When I'm in the black community I do feel at home. I feel that I fit in.

"My boyfriend is black and white, not Jewish. I was always attracted to black or mixed-race men. It feels comfortable to me. Is it that I assumed some men would not find me attractive? Or am I simply I drawn to black or mixed men? Probably a combination of both.

"If it were up to me, would I send my kid to Hebrew School? Yes." ■



for thought

7 pages on sensuality, humor, guilt, love, shame, power, memory, gluttony and delight.

Everything is feminist about the kitchen.

And so much is Jewish about food.

Leviticus (chapter 11) wants us to keep kosher so that we are present to gratitude and holiness.

Deuteronomy (chapter 14) wants us to keep kosher because promises matter:

We promised God at Sinai to do certain things —
one of those things has to do with
how we stuff our mouths.

The three intimate stories that follow shorten the [food] chain between gender and Judaism.

United by KIBBE

by ELISE WIENER

FOOD

for thought



My Aleppo-born grandmother, Jemilah Laniado Dahab, mother of eight. My grandfather never once spoke to his seven daughters, only to his one son.

I TASTED MY FIRST KIBBE AT MY AUNT RAY'S HOUSE.

She's not alive anymore. Aunt Ray was my mother's sister, the fourth of eight children—seven sisters and one brother. I loved going to holidays at her house. After you found the pile of coats in one of the bedrooms and threw yours on top and came downstairs, every one of your 36 relatives got up from his or her chair (or the floor) to give you a kiss and wish you a Happy Holiday. Of the sisters, only Aunt Ray made kibbe, and she only did so for Rosh HaShana and the seders. So it had to have been at one of those holidays that I ate my first kibbe.

Kibbe united us—torpedo-shaped, deep-fried, scalding-hot-right-out-of-the-Fry-o-Lator. Hard on the outside, slightly spicy. The entire family fought over them at the threshold of the kitchen as my Aunt Ray tried to jockey them past us into the dining room. We kept count—who had nabbed two, who seven. Sometimes I'd stand and watch Aunt Ray fry them, wedging myself between her and the Spanish lady who silently washed dishes and wiped out the sink with a sponge. I was always in the way as my Aunt Ray moved back and forth in her kitchen, her palace of food, where she somberly hibernated preparing our

feasts. Shaking her head, she'd mutter to herself in her smoker's voice, "Everything is terrible."

Aunt Ray was holy; the weary cook draped in a maroon velour housecoat. Appetizers—including kibbe—aside, which she kept coming from the moment we arrived at the house until the minute Uncle Mo and Norman entered the house after shul and said *kiddush*, she'd whisper to us children, "Quick, have some soup," and dole out portions while we pushed away clutter on the kitchen table. Rice. Carrots. Broth. Chicken. Matzo balls. Slurping, our chins soaked, aunts wandering in and out, holding us captive to unanswerable questions. "So, Elise, how are things?" "You look beautiful, *what's new?*" I never had a clue how to answer them.

IT WAS THE KIBBE THAT MADE US FAMILY. The kibbe. Getting dressed for the holiday, driving on the Long Island Expressway, our car exiting for Brooklyn on the winding metal-grid ramp to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, parking on the quiet street of brownstones where religious families walked in grouped silence, finally entering into the crowded fragrant house. We knew it would be there, the smell wafting to the sidewalk: kibbe.

My favorite cousin was Jayne, a magical sixteen while I seemed to remain forever seven or eight or nine, plodding through my childhood, never reaching that sophistication Jayne exuded. She would walk into a room smelling dramatic, swinging her head of gorgeous brown hair as she leaned on one hip. Red lips. The coolest outfit. She was an artist. She loved Bruce Springsteen. She was from *Brooklyn*.

Jayne and her older sister Vicki would let me into their shared room to show me their teenage stuff. Huge stuffed animals, lots of them, and small vanities crowded with bottles. I was shy, and sat there quietly, longing to have something to say, sitting on their double bed, watching them.

When I was four, my cousin Norman, their brother, cupped his hands under my armpits and swung me up and down between his legs in the teeny galley kitchen, shouting, "Look at you, you're gorgeous!" It was frightening, but we were all together: cousins, aunts and uncles, the rhythm of their voices all talking at once, endlessly smoking cigarettes, cracking pistachio nuts, eating kibbe and more kibbe. Telling stories and interrupting, "No, Millie, I'll tell you how it was!" "Stella!" "Sareena!"—they called to each other in New York accents. We were family. These people were my birthright.

NORMAN WOULD BE IN HIS LATE FORTIES NOW, but he's no longer living. He died of a heart attack, though it could have been related to a drug overdose. He lived hard—drugs, failed businesses, sports car crashes, shattered bones. The family couldn't hold him together. In later years I avoided him, having heard all the gossip, his drug-rehab stays, his explosions of rage at my cousins. At my cousin Jordi's bar mitzvah he had taken me for a ride, a very fast one. We did cocaine, or did we get high? He kissed me on the lips in front of cousins and aunts and uncles, and I stood there pretending nothing happened. At the shiva house we all said nothing, just went through the motions and absorbed the sadness that Norman's life had been.

Before Norman died, Uncle Mo did, and then Aunt Ray.

Shaking her head over the
Fry-o-Lator, Aunt Ray would
mutter in her smoker's voice,
"Everything is terrible."

AS CHILDREN, ALONG WITH KIBBE, WE WERE TOLD ABOUT OUR ILLUSTRIOUS ANCESTRY IN ALEPPO, SYRIA. Aleppo. In Hebrew, *Aram Tsoba*. In Arabic, *Halebi*—the place where Abraham the shepherd came down from the mountain and gave milk ("*halav*") to everyone who was impoverished. "You come from a line of great rabbis," my aunts would intone.

"Great rabbis." Over and over. Weighty for simply having been spoken. "Kabbalists." If I was lucky, I'd wriggle into a spot at the big dining room table, under the chandelier, as my aunts and uncle got going, all elbows, who could tell it better? Helen or Sareena, or Lilian? Julie or Millie? The coarse laughter, the word "Mama" and again "Mama." "Mama"—spoken with gravelly reverence. "Great rabbis" and "Mama." Mama and a great line of rabbis. Kabbalists.

At the Passover *sedarim*, my cousin Jayne was the one who got to hold the metal cooking pot behind her back while Uncle Mo dribbled in wine from his cup—one dribble for each of the ten plagues in Egypt. I squeezed my mind to imagine every plague. Jayne took the cursed wine to the toilet, flushing it away, never looking at it. It was a Syrian custom to make a wish—what did Jayne wish for?

I always wished that one year I would flush the cursed wine down the toilet.

AND THERE WAS THE AFIKOMAN. Wrapped in a napkin. Symbol of bondage. It passed from oldest male to youngest—each putting the bundle over his left shoulder and then over his head, in a circle, as Uncle Mo, his white shirt unbuttoned, his hairy chest, his sleeves rolled, king of the house, his Syrian accent twisting from his throat, raspy, nasal, guttural, fist banging on the table, ceremoniously bellowed: "Where are you coming from?" "*Mitzrayim*"—Egypt. "And where are you going to?" "*Yerushalayim*"—Jerusalem. And the *afikoman* would make its rounds.

We are royalty, I thought. At ballet class, I would ask the other girls, "Are you Jewish or Christian?" Because then I would tell them, "I am like a queen." Thirteen generations ago, my forebear left Spain during the Inquisition and went to Sfat where he studied with the great Rav Yosef Karo. And when Rav Karo was asked to be the leader of the Jewish community of Aleppo—that most illustrious of all Jewish communities—he declined, and said, "I am sending you a man just like myself." And he sent my forebear, long ago in the 16th century.

AT THE END OF OUR MEALS, ONLY NORMAN AND UNCLE MO PICKED UP THEIR BENTCHERS [prayer books], the two voices praying together, Norman a millisecond behind, their song lost under the noise of our partying, the television going really loud, my other uncles and cousins sitting satiated on chairs and on the couch. Aunt Ray still slaving in the kitchen, Norman sitting with his father in a lonely gesture of goodness. I sometimes opened a prayer book and sat down with them. They never noticed me, but all those rabbis I came from, I believed fervently that they were watching.

And then Uncle Mo had a stroke and no longer banged on the table. His leg dragged, his vitality was lost. Norman and my other male cousins took me and my brother upstairs and turned us onto drugs. The door shut, we were cramped, passing a pipe from one to the other, not really talking. The adults hadn't a

clue. Then Jayne would take me to her room, open the folding doors to her overstuffed closet and try to find something to give me. I would sit shyly on the bed.

"Do you want this, Elise? This is gorgeous."

She gave me a white ostrich wrap. She gave me black, satin-suspender hot pants that ballooned before they attached to the thigh. Decades later, they still hung in my closet.

I AM ORTHODOX, THE ONLY ONE WHO REMAINS RELIGIOUS IN MY EXTENDED FAMILY. Our three kids jolting about the table, about to spill food on upholstery—to my ears, the house rattles without forty family members filling it. Should my husband and I have had more children? How did my grandmother do it?

The Dahab-Laniado clan of my mother's and her parents' generations has faded to a memory. My mother's mother and father. Seven sisters and one brother, disconnected by distances and death. Those moments from my childhood lost, like a great movie which ends and leaves you gaping into the chasm of what once was. My children will never see this film, and I can't even move my mouth to tell this story. The elegant dining room table filled with platters of stuffed eggplant, roast chicken, potatoes, peas, rice—all spread across a white white tablecloth. Aunt Ray escorting food to its grand entrance. Uncle Mo at the head of the table like a god. Handsome cousins bantering.

Celebrities I once knew. We have all moved away, little pieces of family superseding what once seemed primary and forever.

Now I am the sole descendent who makes kibbe.

Torpedo-shaped, deep-fried, scalding-hot-right-out-of-the-

Those childhood scenes are gone, like a great movie that my children will never see. I can't even move my mouth to tell this story.

Fry-o-Lator. Hard on the outside, slightly spicy. When we all get together—so rarely—at my house, I make them, the smell wafting out, as always, to the sidewalk. Kibbe.

With one bite, we are comrades once again. ■

Elise Weiner is a potter, fabric artist and graphic designer and recipient of two Louie Awards. She lives in New Haven with her husband and three children.

KIBBE NEBELSIA (TORPEDOES)

Holding a tray of steaming hot kibbe is like winning a popularity contest. When my family members used to cross the border into Aunt Ray's kitchen, wondering if the empty tray would be refilled, she'd wave them away with her arms: "They're coming! They're coming!"

DOUGH

- 3 c. bulgur wheat
- 1 c. flour
- 1 c. matzo meal
- 2 T. salt
- 2 T. oil
- 2 tsp. dried red pepper flakes
- 2 tsp. cumin
- 1 1/2 c. water (or more)

MEAT

- 3 lbs. chopped meat
- 2 lg. onions, chopped
- 2 T. oil
- 1 tsp. allspice
- 1/2 tsp. kosher salt
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- 1/2 c. pine nuts, toasted
- 1/2 c. pomegranate seeds (optional)

FILLING (For best results, prepare filling one day ahead and refrigerate.) Sauté chopped onion in oil until translucent. Add meat and gently sauté mixture over medium/low heat, continually breaking meat apart until all fat has evaporated and meat is brown. Cool meat. Mix in seasoning, toasted pine nuts and optional pomegranate seeds. Set aside.

DOUGH Grind bulgur to flour consistency in coffee grinder or food mill. Set aside. Mix together flour, matzo meal and spices. Wet bulgur wheat by covering with water. Do not soak. Scoop and squeeze bulgur with hands and add to flour mixture. Mixture will be crumbly. Add oil. Gradually knead in water until dough becomes soft. Let set for 1 hour. (If dough later becomes dry, sprinkle with water and reknead.)

ASSEMBLE KIBBE Arrange table with dough, filling, 2 plates, 1 dish towel, 1 bowl of water to wet hands and a glass of extra water to moisten dough when necessary. Lay dish towel in front of you to catch water. Moisten hands. Working over plate, roll dough into small ball. Keeping hands wet, press hole into ball with forefinger and shape kibbe with twisting motion into cone. Sides of cone should not be too thick. Fill with meat, adding a drop of water to the top. Do not overfill. To close kibbe, moisten fingers and pinch top together. Patch any cracks with small pieces of dough and water. After completing each group of 10, freeze in an aluminum tin in freezer overnight.

Place waxed paper in between layers. Place in plastic bags in the morning. Keep frozen until frying. Fry kibbe in an electric Fry-o-Later with basket until dark brown. Serve immediately!

Adapted from *Deal Delights* (by the Sisterhood of The Deal Synagogue, Deal, NJ, 1985)

Advice for the Bride-to-Be: "JUST DON'T EAT!"

by MELISSA ORSHAN SPANN

FOOD

for thought



IT IS TWO WEEKS BEFORE MY WEDDING AND I'M CRUISING THE DESSERT TABLE at my cousin's bat mitzvah. I've just finished sampling the chocolate torte when I hear the voice of my great-aunt over my shoulder. "Are you sure you should be eating that, Melissa? Remember, your dress..."

During my seven-month engagement, I felt like I heard remarks like this non-stop. From the moment the rock was on my finger, everyone from relatives to total strangers seemed to feel the need to offer incredibly intrusive comments and advice. About my body size—"You're not eating that bagel, are you? Only four weeks to your wedding!" About my appearance—"Are you *exercising*?" And about what-

ever was moving towards my mouth—"The number of Weight Watchers points in that pizza, Melissa!" Most of the remarks came, alas, from women, not men, and they bespoke the passing on of a complicated bridal legacy: I was being inducted into an oppressed group that expressed its support—and sense of female intimacy—by handing down age-old, internalized oppressions. I was the recipient of "teachings." This is what it means to be a bride; this is what you are supposed to say or do or look like. And since I'd never been in this exact position before, I was (I realized in hindsight) particularly vulnerable.

About six weeks prior to the wedding, things came to a head during the first fitting of my custom-made gown. With my mother, father and two younger sisters at my side to witness the iconic moment when the magnificent one-time-wear garment would be placed on my body, the unthinkable happened. The gown didn't fit—it was too small. It couldn't be zipped. There was shock in the room. Numbed silence. Then I started bawling, and nothing could soothe me. Not deep breaths, not hugs and Kleenex from my tremendously supportive family, not a call to my empathic fiancé.

Finally my mother had a revelation: the bustier was too thick for the dress. We removed the satin undergarment and the gown zipped up like a glove. *Victory!*—except that the damage had already been done: the capstone moment, and there I was drowning myself in tears, feeling like a failure. How had I set myself up for this? How had we all become party to such a ridiculous moment?

The icing on the cake (as it were) had been the solution offered matter-of-factly by the upscale boutique's seamstress when she realized we had an unzippable dress on our hands. "Just don't eat," she instructed me matter-of-factly.

"Don't eat?" I said incredulously. "The wedding is six weeks away!"

She reiterated the solution that I know has been offered to countless brides before and after me. "Trust me," she said. "Just don't eat."

ALTHOUGH I HAVE HAD MOMENTS OF FEELING CRITICAL TOWARDS ASPECTS OF MY BODY, I was feeling very good as I embarked on the countdown to W-Day. My fiancé and I had established increasingly healthy eating habits and we were becoming regular gym-goers in an attempt to enter this significant new stage of our lives in a positive way. Despite my seemingly robust attitude, however, every unsolicited comment sunk in, making me wonder if I was really “ready” to become a bride.

Does “bride” equal “thin,” I wondered at my most vulnerable? In order to get married, did I need to fit into a designated dress size? Did I need to have a perfect complexion? A uni-model brand of physical beauty? Becoming a bride clearly meant undergoing a submission ritual in which the rest of the world bizarrely and obtrusively interjected opinions on everything—not just flowers and frosting, but whether it was imperative that I wear Bobbi Brown or Chanel.

Bridal magazines hurt, too—every one of them providing yet one more urgent strategy for “losing the bump before you take the jump.” Everywhere I turned, messages bombarded me:

**I didn't feel I had to lose weight.
I felt I was fine, but the
unending comments
wore at my self-esteem.**

Change the way you look! You can't become a bride if you're not perfect! When, I wondered, had being a bride stopped being about the fact that you were deeply in love with someone and wanted to make a witnessed and lifelong commitment to sharing with that person your values and growth and goals, your hearth and bed?

WITH A BACKGROUND IN MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING AND FAMILY THERAPY, I have read enough textbook material to know how important self-esteem and positive body image are to young women today. I've also worked for years with young Jewish women, advising B'nai B'rith youth groups and facilitating the program “Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!” I know how crucial it is not only to preach positive messages, but to model, as a leader, a healthy relationship with my own body. Now more than ever, though, I felt the heavy hand of society pressuring me, and in a very culture-specific way. I wanted to scream out to every onlooker to stop harassing generation after generation of young women with destructive messages.

Much literature links these dynamics to increasing rates of eating disorders and obsessive body preoccupation. More recent data suggests that Jewish women in particular feel added pressures to be thin, as assimilation into mainstream culture urges us to leave our physically “Jewishly identifiable” ethnic traits

behind—smoothing our hair down, say, or feeling critical of a body frame that's an ancestral inheritance. If I—someone who works with these issues professionally, who knows the literature, who considers herself a feminist, and who has, or so I thought, liberated herself from this kind of tyranny—nonetheless feels menaced and susceptible, what hope is there, I wondered, for the rest of my generation?

AND THEN, ONE DAY, IT JUST SUDDENLY JUST DAWNED ON ME: *Mah nishtana ha-lilah ha-zeh?* Why should this wedding night be different from all others? Why did I need to look different from my usual self on this night that would be etched for all time in photos and DVD's? Didn't I want to use it as a chance to proclaim that I am the size and the shape and the look that I am? “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*,” as God says to Moses at the burning bush, “I am that I am.” If I am okay on all other nights, then that is good enough for THE night, and I would commit to start carrying this message to all those folks around me who were incessantly prodding me to starve and suck it in. I needed to push back for all young women, to argue that we have to stop the criticisms and flip negative observations that we thoughtlessly and reflexively lay on one another. If I'm fine with myself in general, then I'm fine with myself on the night of my wedding, and that would have to be good enough for all my unsolicited advisors.

Sure enough, after my breakthrough revelation, something happened inside of me. I was able to BE a bride, to enjoy myself, to *get in there* and luxuriate in my wedding. It was a four-day extravaganza—from welcome reception to farewell brunch—and I was present for every moment of it. I also understood that the pageantry of the wedding and the focus on me as a bride was part of my family's need to heal, to celebrate after three years of anguish in the aftermath of an accident that severely injured my younger brother. I understood that young feminists like myself want the spectacle *and* the gender equity—we don't want, as earlier generations of feminists did, to dispense with our femininity—and that this wish is inevitably and perhaps irreconcilably complicated.

I would be lying if I said that as the dress was pulled up over my head—by the team of carefully trained family members and party planners that it took to arrange it on my body—that I didn't enter into a sudden panic that it simply might not zip up. But the moment passed, and the dress fit. And I looked beautiful. And I survived the monstrosity of the largest zit I've ever had in my life that appeared on the morning of the Big Day. And the wedding was phenomenal. And I swore to be a vigilante about this topic for brides-to-be and their “well-wishers” in the years to come.

And, oh yeah, most important, I am now happily married to that person I most deeply love. ■

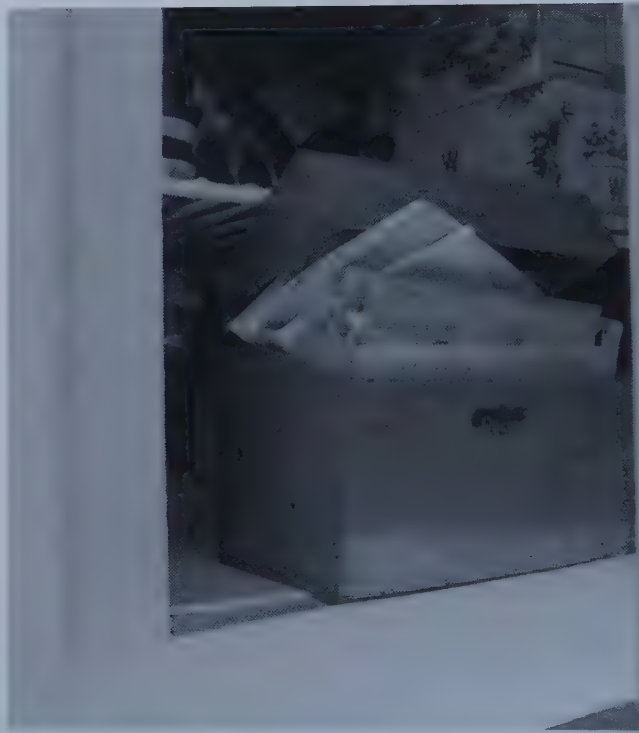
Melissa Orshan Spann is a newlywed living in Philadelphia. She works at The Renfrew Center with women and girls struggling with eating disorders, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Couples and Family Therapy.

Dead Women in my KITCHEN CUPBOARD

by SUSAN REMSON

FOOD

for thought



THERE ARE DEAD WOMEN IN MY KITCHEN CUPBOARD. There are living ones in there, too. They are all tucked away in my recipe box, and from time to time I let them out. When I open the little metal container, they talk to me. Some of them say, "Pick me, pick me." Others say, "Lots of calories, but oh so good!" or, "Low fat, very healthy. Make me." Sometimes these women make me feel guilty. They say, "It's been a really long time since you've made me, and I feel like you are ignoring me, and I don't know why. I can deal with it, but I want you to think about it. That's all. I just want you to think about it." Others are more sidelong and just say, "Is *that* what you're making?" At that point, I shut the lid, and they are quiet again for a while.

Many of these women come to cook with me during holidays, and my kitchen gets crowded with both the living and the dead. At Pesach, my deceased mother-in-law is making gefilte fish at the kitchen table, removing every bone of the fish before she puts it through the hand grinder. After the grinding, she pours the mass into the wooden mixing bowl, a family heirloom that has been scarred from five generations of chopping. She adds the matzah meal and eggs and stirs it all with her hands, and then seasons to taste. The water in the large white porcelain pot is boiling, and she plops each piece in, taking care not to splash the

hot liquid on her face. The smell permeates the kitchen and the rest of the house, and is proof that she has made this concoction from scratch. She cleans the kitchen as she waits for the end-product and the accolades that will follow later in the day.

My mother, deceased now also, is with me at holidays, too. Although she didn't usually come to our home for Pesach, her recipes were always with me, especially her method for making *kneidlach* [matzah balls] for the soup, in a way that no other recipe I have ever seen calls for. She separates the yolks from the whites, and beats the whites with a wire whisk that, after so many years, has only one wire running through the middle. She adds the matzah meal—by feel rather than measure—and makes perfectly round balls to plop into her pot of boiling water. That's it—no chicken fat, no oil—nothing but matzah meal. The balls will be light and fluffy and perfectly round, each and every batch, as they have been since she learned how to make them from her mother, a caterer at the shul and for private parties in Hamilton, Ontario.

At Rosh HaShanah, my aunts are there, too—Bessie and Marion, Sarah and Anne—two alive, two deceased, arguing over what kind of fruit to use for our family's famous "Pie-

Cake.” While they’re at it, I decide to make a recipe I got from Zlata, an old friend in Kenosha: her One-Bowl Apple Cake. My very-much-alive daughter Aviva tells me we should include a batch of Monster Cookies in the list of desserts this year,

These women come cook with me during the holidays, and my kitchen gets crowded with both the living and the dead.

or maybe my niece Miriam’s Meringues. I prefer my friend Esther’s Carmel Pecan Squares, which is really a Passover recipe, but they are so good I like making them all year.

SOMETIMES I LET MY COOKING COMPANIONS OUT OF THEIR BOX because none of my many cookbooks seem to have the right thing. Not the cookbook that was a gift from my in-laws the first Chanukah after I was married; not one of the many cookbooks I have accumulated from Hadassah chapters and sisterhoods all over the country; not even the Moosewood cookbook that was a special gift from Georgia—a dear neighbor and friend. So I take out my recipe box and look through it. It’s like looking through the “All Women’s Family Photo Album,” each three-by-five card a memory.

Many of the cards are in my mother’s handwriting. I can tell when she wrote them by the quality of the script. The older recipes are neater and easy to read. The later ones were written with a shakier hand. Most are faded, and many have food splotches on them. There are recipes for cheese blintzes, kugel with raisins, brisket, and her yummy Chocolate Intrigue Cake. I can tell hers from my friend Carole’s (she’s also deceased) because Carole’s were always typed in light blue ink. So were my mother-in-law’s. I wish I had gotten more of their recipes so that I could linger with them longer in my recipe box.

If I compare the recipes that I get these days from my sister-in-law Marcia—who is very much alive—with those from 30 years ago, it’s clear how differently we have come to eat over time. Marcia’s more recent contributions come from finds in *Cooking Light* or *The Food Channel*. Spinach Cheese Balls, however, are still a must for bat mitzvah cocktail receptions, and we both know there is no recipe for my (very alive) brother’s favorite, Greasy Steak and Potatoes.

There is a special category for those women from whom I have received only one recipe, and in some cases I have never even made their dish, but rather just keep their cards as a reminder of our brief encounter. This is the case with Chicken Zingara from Sandy who died so unexpectedly and tragically. She was the first of my contemporaries to go, and a

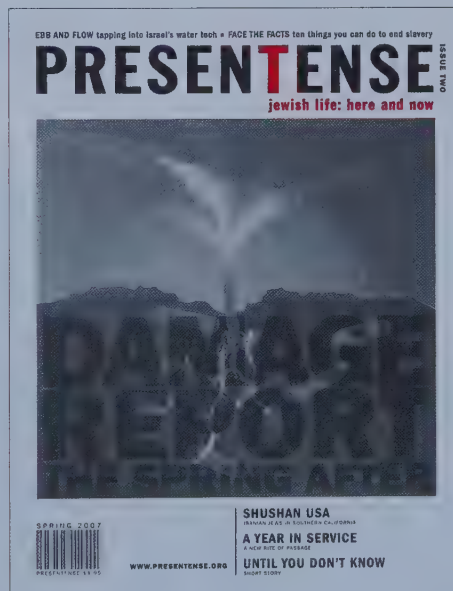
real reminder that sudden heart attacks do kill women in their early 50s. There is Japanese Miso Soup from Jack and Dotty, whom my husband and I knew from our student days and liked very much, but lost track of over the years. This recipe always reminds me of people in my life I regret not staying in touch with. Japanese Miso Soup goes with Joyce’s Cucumber Salad, and after 35 years and several hundred miles, I still talk to Joyce regularly, and not because of the salad.

THERE ARE PHOTOCOPIES AND NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS, CARDS AND POST-ITS. They are not in any order, and I often think I should take some time and categorize them in a logical way so that when I go looking for a recipe for chicken, it will be filed under Chicken, and cake will be under Cake. The way I do it now is to flip through desserts and soups and whatever until I find what I am looking for. But then again, if I organized my box I wouldn’t get to think about all these women on my way to the right recipe—and I would deeply miss that part of the journey.

When I put my file box back in the cupboard, I do it gently so as not to disturb the women whose recipes I didn’t choose. As I close the lid I say *L’hitraot*. We’ll visit again soon, I am sure. ■

Susan Remson, retired from the biotechnology industry, is a writer in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

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*Pri Chadash**

by DARYA MATTES, *paintings by DI*



A

strange, knobby thing, this new fruit. Leathery crimson skin bruised in spots, and a place like a rupture leading in deep, past the armor. Your knife severs it cleanly in two, slicing through red skin, thick white pith, and seeds that nestle in luminous rows like the most flamboyant Indian corn. You force your index finger along the edge of the broken skin, detaching seeds that snap as they are released into your palm, wrinkle your forehead apprehensively as you transfer a few into your mouth. Your fingers brush my hand as you give some to me, scarlet beads that glint in the harsh kitchen light like a glass of merlot, or like the Nile on that day when the Hebrew god turned the river to blood. They are smooth on my tongue and they burst when I bite down, spattering juice that is slightly sour, utterly foreign, just barely sweet.

There are other fruits on the table tonight: a bowl of apples, crisp and green, approaching a ripeness that wouldn't have been fully achieved until the first frost. We picked them early, reaching up through the leaves, as the Mexican children do. It was we who were childlike; playing at harvest even as families made their migratory trek across the region, nomads with their lives in a pick-up truck, changing jobs and schools and doctors and markets and communities to put oranges, plums, cherries, apples on our table. We strolled through a pick-your-own orchard that day in the September twilight and you rubbed an oversized Empire on your shirt and raked your teeth through



the green skin, reveling in the tang and the crunch. I sat shotgun in your car and our paper bag of apples was anchored between my calves, red-and-green shiny skins winking up at me as the light outside faded and the horizon glowed pink and gold. You stretched an arm toward me, handling the wheel easily, one-handed, with a competent softness, as the fingers on your outstretched arm twined between mine. The car hit a pothole, and we laughed as the apples leapt in their bag, settling back in with a rattle like gentle rain. Tonight we eat them sliced, browning slightly on their exposed white surfaces, dipped liberally in alfalfa honey from the farmer's market that drips in luxuriant swirls onto our plates, between our fingers, until we are sticky with sweetness and the apples' gentle crispness is

drowned in a syrupy sweet that burns our throats. *L'shana tova u'metuka*: to a good and sweet new year.

A muddle, now, of fruit that is dried; there are raisins baked into challah, plumped to bursting in the eggy dough that is twisted into a round, fat braid. You come home in the evenings with a fresh challah, still warm, in a paper bag, that you bought at the bakery on your way back from work. You discard it on the couch with your corduroy blazer, like so much dirty laundry, as you join me in the kitchen, or in the living room, or in the bedroom. Later we emerge, giddy, you in my old hooded sweatshirt, and we discover the bag with immoderate glee, tear fistfuls off of the challah, and consume nearly the whole thing. Tiny raisins like buried treasure hide in

amongst the dough, and their sparseness only increases their potency.

It is the harvest holiday, a time of ancient pilgrimage, and ironically, at this celebration of abundance, the fruit turns to paper. I cut apples and oranges and two-dimensional bunches of grapes out of construction paper, and we color them with markers, affix sequins with dabs of Elmer's glue, string them from the ceiling of the *sukkah*, the ceremonial harvest shelter, with lengths of yarn. They flutter there, these flat, inedible fruits, dancing in the October wind that hurries through the gaping bamboo roof, swinging as far as their yarn stems will allow. You hold the *etrog*, the one real fruit of the holiday, under my nose, and I smell citrus: sharp, pungent, almost bitter. *Eetrog* is an ugly word, you say. I agree, but the closest thing in English is "citron" and that is worse, false, like saying "skullcap" instead of *kippah* or "phylacteries" instead of *tefillin*. "Phylactery," especially, sounds like some kind of prehistoric bird, with an enormous wingspan and a hoarse, lonely call. We lie in the *sukkah* at night, sharing a sleeping bag for warmth, and I run one of your curls between my first two fingers absently, possessively, and the stars sparkle quietly, muted by the sequins on construction paper grapes that are closer, easier to reach.

A pile of dried dates, of fresh figs, of carob-coated raisins and sliced oranges and olives with the pits still inside. The kitchen is crowded, with people as well as fruits: a woman pours carob candies into a metal bowl, and the sharp "ping!" when they land drowns out her earnest, open-faced laugh that sets her earrings swinging. A lanky man pours wine into the glasses on the table, set for far too many for it to hold; fills them to the brim until purple stains seep into the embroidered tablecloth. We gather, this curly-haired, wool-clad crowd, around the mountain

of dates, figs, raisins, apricots, carob, prunes, oranges; we celebrate the fruits of trees that grow halfway around the world, in a place where snow does not tap at the kitchen window, collecting in drifts under the eaves. We grin at each other from under lowered lashes, self-conscious now, praising a god who *borei p'ri ha'etz*, who creates the fruit of the tree. I consider the walnut tree in the yard, gnarled branches now coated with a layer of frozen snow, whose nuts we allow to drop in the fall, to be raided by squirrels, to rot. Reach for a succulent fig, flown in from South Africa, and take a bite.

"Oh, once there was a wicked, wicked man and Haman was his name," sir. He would have murdered all the Jews, though they were not to blame, sir." What kind of propaganda is this, I ask you, irritable, brushing flour from my nose. We roll dough flat across a cutting board, cut round cookies from it, and fill them with jam: apricot, raspberry, prune. Fold them into triangles to represent the hat of Haman, this murderer of song and legend. How absurd would it be, I ask, if we made curly handlebar cookies and called them Hitler's moustaches. If black people baked cookies shaped like the pointed noses of their white oppressors. If Native Americans munched on snacks shaped like cowboy hats. You shoot me a dirty look and tell me it's just a children's song. You have flour in your hair and a streak of prune jam, *lekvar*, on your cheek. Fruit that has been ripened past the brink of salvation, pulverized beyond recognition, preserved for far too long. The brown smear on your face twitches as you grit your teeth, bearing down on the rolling pin as the dough is stretched thin, too thin, and finally tears, creating a jagged hole in the center, irreparable.

The epitome of symbolism: a seder plate, decorated with scenes from the Israelite exodus from Egypt, filled with food that is much more symbol than sustenance. An egg, parsley, dry matzah, salt water. Bland foods, even unpleasant foods. An uncle lifts high the dish of grated horseradish, a dingy yellow; held aloft in improbable prominence above the gleaming flatware and bleach-white

tablecloth. We pass the dish along with a bowl of the one fruit on the table: charoset, chopped apples mixed with nuts and wine and cinnamon, meant to remind us of the mortar used by Israelite slaves when they constructed the great pyramids in Egypt. A bite could be delicious: sweet red wine over tart apples, soft walnuts, a trace of spice. Before we can eat, though, we mix it with the horseradish, maror, a symbol of oppression. The fruit, by the time it reaches my lips, is tainted by a bitterness so intense that it makes my eyes water. I finish the little pile of bitter fruit on my plate. I avoid taking a gulp of wine to wash the taste away.

Hunger, too, is a part of ritual observance. To fast is to detach from the normal cycle of self-satisfaction, to think of things that are greater than the heavy feel of fullness in our bellies and sweetness on

fall, calling hoarsely as it slides over the sweltering horizon. Then there is an emptiness, and it is only later that, relieved, I can attribute it to my hunger.

I am chopping onions when the doorbell rings, tears streaming down my face as the onion essence burns my eyes. I wipe at my eyes impatiently, shoving the tears aside; I answer the door still holding the chopping knife. You offer me a pomegranate, balanced carefully on the palm of your competent, outstretched hand. You see my red eyes, the bits of onion still stuck to the knife I am holding. Take the knife from me, carefully slice the crimson fruit in two. You offer me a handful of seeds and I take them from your hand, where they rest in your cupped fingers like some coveted treasure. I close my still-stinging eyes and tilt back my head, pour the seeds onto my tongue, bite down. The

The July heat seeps through my skin, between the strands of my hair, around the edges of my eyelids. Eyes shut to the summer sun, I see red.

our tongues. It is hot; the July heat seeps through my skin, between the strands of my hair, around the edges of my eyelids. Eyes shut to the summer sun, I see red: destruction of the first and second great temples in Jerusalem, for which I am supposedly in mourning. I am in mourning. For lives and lifeways that no longer exist. For things that are irrevocably done: a temple comes crashing down, held together with nothing more permanent than mortar made from apples and wine, and no one can put it back together again. Like Humpty-Dumpty, I think, but I never liked children's songs. A shadow falls across my closed eyelids and, unwilling to open them, I sense an Ancient Phylactery gliding above me, casting this shadow as its mammoth wings rise and

seeds of the new fruit, thin skins yielding, burst in my mouth, more familiar than last year, and ten times as sweet. ■

Darya Mattes is a recent graduate of Cornell University. She now lives and works in Washington, DC.

Painter Dina Toledano, born in Egypt, has lived and worked in Jerusalem since 1966.

It's Lilith's Annual Fiction Contest!
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our website, www.Lilith.org

I am thinking of buying
yellow plates. Is milk yellow?
Yellow and blue, and a small, square jug.
I keep finding myself
puzzled as a hooked fish in the aisles
of department stores, wondering
about the colour of milk.

KOSHERING

by SONYA ARDAN

And numbers. I ask
strangers behind counters at what age
a woman acquires a dinner service.
Of themselves, plates
are no more irrevocable than breadknives,
but in quantities...
It is a good yellow this, a decisive yellow

And a meditative blue.
They are growing on me.
And it isn't the money - money
replaces itself and is forgotten.
It is the ownership -
Even from under brown paper in the bottom corner
of my cupboard they will be bright

And clean as idealism,
grown up as a wedding ring and articulate
as confession. From now on
my kitchen will own up to milk plates.
Yellow and blue, with a rim
like a tide mark.
Six of them.

Since writing this poem, Sonya seems to have acquired numerous sets of dishes, a husband, two children (and another one in progress). She has also published poems in various magazines and writes autobiographical non-fiction (under a pseudonym in the interest of self-protection) for the Jewish Quarterly in Britain.

Poet Alicia Ostriker was the judge for the 2007 Charlotte Newberger Poetry Prize at Lilith. She is the author of 11 books of poetry, her work has been translated into seven languages, and she has been nominated twice for the National Book Award. Appreciating this year's entries, she says:

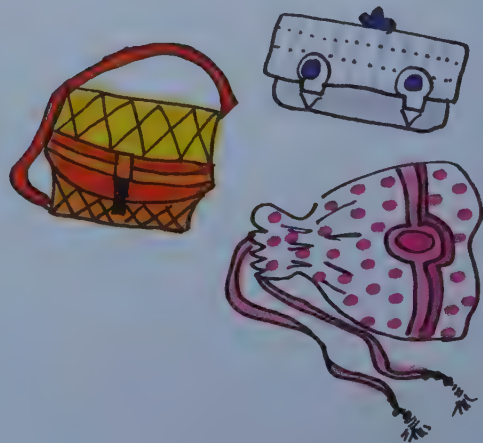
"There are so many ways to be Jewish, so many diverse ways a Jewish woman experiences her Judaism, so many ways of bringing those experiences into poetry, into language that will reach the souls of readers. There were many poems about family, about ancestors living and dead, here and 'over there'. There were Holocaust poems and holiday poems. There were midrashic poems that explored the meaning of biblical characters and stories for us and our time now. Poems of memory, poems of the moment, poems of the quest for holiness, poems yearning for reconciliation with those who might be our enemies. Poems of mourning and joy and everything in between. Beauty of language, beauty of soul."

The poetry prize is named for Charlotte Newberger, whose support for Lilith makes possible the publication of new poems in every issue, reviews of books by established and emerging poets, and this third annual poetry competition. Newberger has had a longstanding interest in poetry and the arts, and has served for many years on the boards of such institutions as Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater and The Poetry Center, as well as serving as president of the National Foundation for the Jewish Culture.



REMEMBER & THE SIEGEL *Hartford, Conne*

FOR 40 YEARS, MY PARENTS RAN THE SIEGEL SHOP, a high-end women's apparel store, first in downtown Hartford, Connecticut, and then, as the neighborhood declined economically, in West Hartford. My grandmother, Rebecca Goldberg, was the one who started the family in retail—she had a shoe store called Goldberg's (how original!), and then a traveling hat kiosk, and then, after she married my grandfather—Abe Siegel—the women's apparel shop. Becky had started the shoe store in order to put her five sisters through college and nursing school, but she herself, of course, she was working, she didn't have the luxury of a college education.



RING MOM GEL SHOP:

cticut

by JANE MATLAW as told to SUSAN SCHNUR

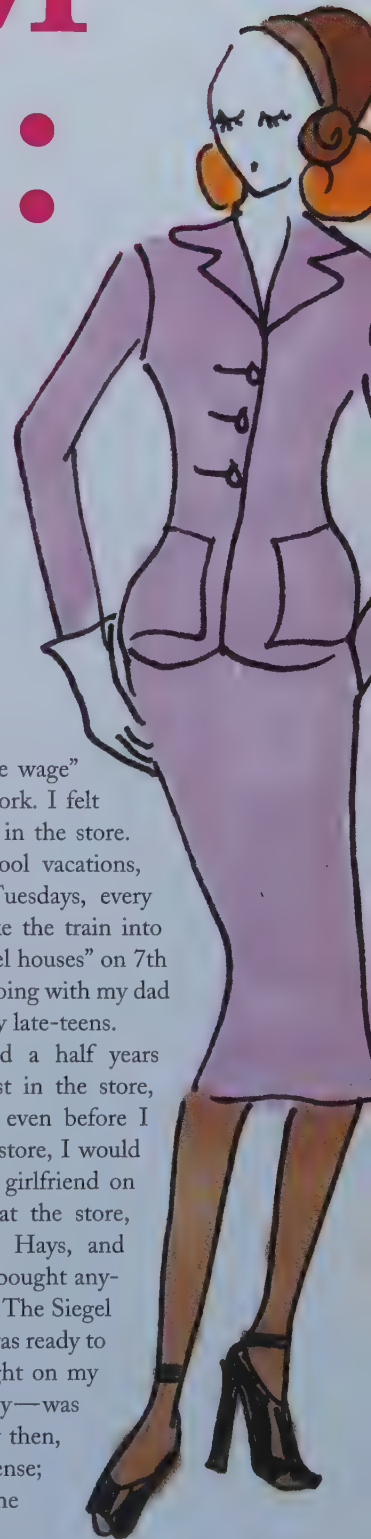
Illustrations by ILENE BECKERMAN

When Grandma was in her late 30s—*old!*—one of her sisters, my great-aunt Jenny Cohen, who was a social worker, said, “Becky, it’s your turn. I’m going to find you a husband.” This was right after WWI and Jenny’s job was helping young soldiers transition into civilian life. She fixed up my grandmother with a Jewish veteran—my Grandpa Abe—and together, this was in 1923, they opened The Siegel Shop. When my parents got married 25 years later, my grandfather cleaned out the cash box and gave the keys to Grandma who handed them over to my parents. They were thrilled to be done with it!

Growing up, I adored everything about the shop, I loved having it be in my life. At 14, I started working there, sewing labels into coats. If Carmel or Drizzle was the manufacturer, say, I’d sew “The Siegel Shop” right under the label. At 15, I moved up into designing windows. You had to dismember the mannequins—take off their wrists, their heads—which was quite a hoot. Their bodies were ridiculous: pointy, perky boobs that no female has ever had, you can bet on that!—boobs with no nipples, 20-inch waists. Mannequins were a size six or eight in those days; now they’re size two or four. I picked out the outfits, made sure they matched in the windows, coordinated jewelry and scarves. The windows had to be the height of fashion—very elegant and *au courant*—to draw in passersby. I also started selling at 15, for \$1.25 an hour, below minimum

wage—it was called “apprentice wage” if you weren’t old enough to work. I felt so grown up really, so invested in the store. I worked there Saturdays, school vacations, summers. All the time! On Tuesdays, every Tuesday, my parents would take the train into Manhattan to buy at the “apparel houses” on 7th Avenue—something I started doing with my dad (I took my mother’s place) in my late-teens.

My sister Martha, two and a half years younger than I, had no interest in the store, or in high fashion. But me... even before I was old enough to work in the store, I would take the bus downtown with a girlfriend on Saturdays, say hi to everyone at the store, go for Chinese food at Song Hays, and then go “shopping”—we never bought anything—and end the day back at The Siegel Shop, and go home when Dad was ready to close up. The first thing I bought on my own—at G. Fox and Company—was my bat mitzvah dress. Mom, by then, completely trusted my fashion sense; I remember her saying that the



outfit I picked out was “perfect.” On the *bimah*, it was kind of a two-fer: I was stepping up into womanhood in religious terms, but I was also stepping up to represent my family’s fashion sense, reinforcing my parents’ role—and The Siegel Shop’s—in the community.

In college, the first thing I wanted to do when I came home on breaks was go to the shop. I couldn’t wait to see “the girls”—the seamstresses, Mrs. Killian and Mrs. Hometh, who worked in the big sewing room in the back; Miss Henrietta Ginzberg—“Ginzy”—a single gal in space shoes who worked as a saleswoman for my parents for over 50 years. I loved these women. I felt like a princess. They’d say, “Oh Janie, we have such wonderful new things! You need to try them on!”

I was also in college when my parents started sending me to buy on my own in Manhattan. The first time I was terrified. I walked into a “house” and they told me that I had to buy 10 pieces minimum of each outfit. We were a small store. We couldn’t handle that. I called my dad long-distance and he said, “Do it. Pick out what you think will sell. Have confidence, Janie.” The stuff I picked out—I could still describe each piece to you, it was Albert Nipon—sold like hotcakes. We had to re-order. I felt like Queen for a Day.

MY MOTHER WAS A GREAT SALESWOMAN. She had a fashion sense that was, well, just gifted. She was very honest—she wouldn’t let a customer buy something that wasn’t flattering. Actually, she could be a little cruel. She’d say, “You can look better than that.” She always called my father “Mr. Matlaw” in the store. As in, “Mr. Matlaw, do you think you can get this in a size 10 for Mrs. Epstein?” She felt she needed to act like an employee. It was interesting. If a customer tried on something with a slight irregularity, a plaid that didn’t exactly line up, her quip was always, “A man on horseback wouldn’t notice.” We had a lot of well-to-do Jewish customers. If one of them said, “Bernie, I don’t really *need* this,” my father would say, “Selma, this isn’t a store for the needy.”

It was a different era. Customers came in, they sat on lounge chairs, my father brought them cups of freshly brewed

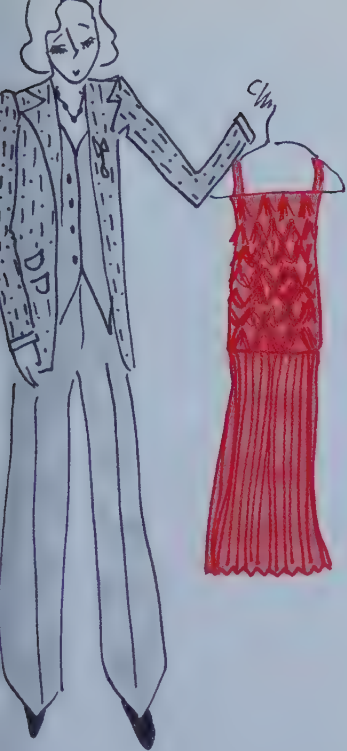
coffee. They would sit there drinking coffee and the salesgirls would bring out outfits to show them, one at a time. We sold bridal trousseaus for honeymoons. That meant one outfit that you’d wear on the plane—a stylish dress and a jacket to match; daywear for the fancy resort you were going to—beautiful white linen pants, a silk blouse. You’d have eveningwear. Your bathing suit cover-up. You bought a “costume,” meaning that three or four pieces all went together. My mother worked part-time, so when my Dad got home after work, they’d talk to each other. “Mrs. Higgins bought six pieces.” “Mrs. Weiner is such a pain in the ass!” Both my parents knew every item in the store: Junior Sophisticates, Chetta B, Junior Accent, Ann Fogarty. They were among the very first to carry Calvin Klein in the ‘70s.

These were lifetime customers. These were relationships! There was a Mrs. Hayward who could no longer drive. My dad would pick her up, take her to lunch at The Steak Place, she’d shop.... There was a woman with polio, an aide to Congressman Sylvio Conte, who drove down from Springfield, Massachusetts, a few times a year. There was the married Mafia guy who brought in the girlfriend and paid cash. There was Dr.

Dowling. Mom always waited on him. He came every Christmas and would buy his wife five gorgeous outfits. It was a high ritual, very exciting and fun when Dr. Dowling came. Mrs. Dowling was a very good-looking woman. We all got into it. At my mother’s funeral, there were so many old customers. They loved my parents, loved going into the store. Mom had meant something to them. Mrs. Dowling made a shiva call. “Doris,” she said, “dressed me. She was a spectacular saleswoman.”



WHEN MY MOTHER DIED—IT WAS A BRAINANEURISM, VERY SUDDEN—we sat *shiva* in Hartford for two days, the house was packed with family and friends, and then I came back home to Boston. I’m divorced, my kids are in college, and I felt so alone. It was so painful. Which is crazy, really, because I have so many close friends. But I was aware—*again*—that I didn’t really connect with my new shul. I hate that. I didn’t have a ready-made *shiva* minyan. I didn’t want to ask people for “favors.” I don’t know. I didn’t have anyone to say Kaddish with. So I would get up by



myself, go to the window—I don't know why I went to the window—and say Kaddish. It felt like a big void.

That first week, I thought about Mom in The Siegel Shop a lot. That surprised me. About how capable and handsome she was. I was proud of her. She carried herself beautifully. About how I used to get to try on all this clothing. Whatever I wanted. When I got older, I would just take things. It was like a girl's dream. Seriously. In a relationship that had its share of mother-daughter difficul-

ties, Mom and I really shared this thing—an “eye” for fashion, an excitement about clothing and style, a knowledge base. For years, I intimately knew my mother in her role as a *professional*, not just as a parent. I worked with her—I loved her “office,” I appreciated what she appreciated. Through the shop, I had shared so much with my parents.

*Here I was... crying
and paying tribute to my mother
by buttoning a blouse on a hanger,
giving a cuff a little yank.*

And then, fairly soon after my mother died, my father, who likes to get things done, said to Martha and me, “I think we need to start going through Mom's things.” My mother was always a little critical of women who had a lot of clothes—she'd famously say, “I'd rather have three or four nice outfits than a closet full of clothes”—and so Martha and I were shocked—*shocked*—when we started going through all her possessions. It was like *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* with the brooms—oh my God, the basement was full, the closets were stuffed. There were clothes and clothes.

First we thought of the Hadassah Shop, because that's where Dad would take unsold clothes at the end of each season. Siegel's was a four-season shop; merchandise had to keep moving. And then we investigated “Dress for Success”—a program that helps poor, unemployed women enter the workforce, prepping them on how to dress, how to do a job interview. They needed certain sizes, bigger sizes, and Mom was a 12. Sometimes a 10, sometimes a 14. Martha took a huge haul over to them, and we thought, “Mom would love this! Women in the workforce and *looking good*? That's what she was about!”

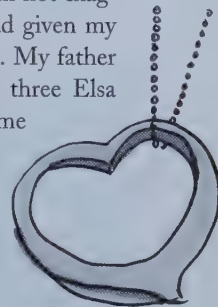
SO THEN MARTHA CALLS AND SAYS, “JANIE. THERE IS STILL SO MUCH STUFF. You and I have to look at all this stuff together—this is so much a part of who Mom *was*. Why don't I just bring all this stuff up with me to Boston?” We had wrapped up dozens and dozens, tons, you have no idea. A lot. We brought them all into my house.

The first thing we did—Mom had a lot of costume jewelry, semi-good jewelry, pocketbooks, scarves—we sat down with it all and thought of every woman who was close to Mom, and set aside, oh, at least 35 items, 40 items. I am not exaggerating. My mother's dear friend Ziona had given my mother a pin for a birthday; we gave it back. My father had bought my sister and mother and me three Elsa Peretti-like hearts, we'd wear them at the same time—it was a sweet thing that he did. So now we had this third necklace—we gave it to my cousin JoAmy who lives in California; she had lived with us for a summer during a tough adolescence; she was like the third sister.

We'd see something and we'd be, like, “Oh, isn't this great for—whoever! Sarah! Aunt Sybil! So-and-So!” It felt so good to do it with Martha, sisters doing it together. It was like a part of my mother that could be passed on. It was grief therapy. It was like scattering ashes, a way of spreading her out. When it came to her socks, however—her feet being in her socks—“I can't deal with it,” I said to Martha. “I can't deal with it. It touched her feet.” It was too close. I couldn't give away socks. And the make-up, the moisturizer? Using someone else's make-up feels *really* intimate. I don't know. It's still in the bathroom; Martha and I use it when we go home.

We were going through memories, our memories were tied to clothing. Oh, remember this beige leather skirt Mom wore with snaps all the way down the front? She had a love of two-toned spats, of shoes that tied, that looked manly but with pointy toes. My father loved these, too. “Oh God do you remember Mom wore this to Nate's bar mitzvah?” A lot of black-and-white. She liked dark, striped pants suits; they made her look elegant.

SO BEFORE I KNEW IT, I TOOK TWO ROOMS AND WAS TURNING THEM INTO THE SIEGEL SHOP—my son Ben's room (he was at college) and the guest room. I emptied the closets, hung suits outside the closets, hung things wherever I could. I set up the “store” by genre—I folded all the sweaters in neat piles, by groupings: blouses in a closet, pants folded in threes on the bed, hats. Drawers pulled out. It was very appealing to look at. All the shoes lined up on the floor. I was 15—designing the windows again, picking out outfits, making sure that everything matched from the sidewalk. Coordinating scarves; all very *haute*, to draw in passersby.



And it was funny, because I didn't have any energy for sitting *shiva*, for going to the synagogue to say Kaddish. I was so depleted, and these things just were not in any way helpful to me. But here I was, crying and paying tribute to my mother by buttoning a blouse on a hanger, by giving a cuff a little yank. And then I realized that I wanted 12 of my friends to come over and be in one big "dressing room"—all together, laughing and crying and dressing and undressing. The idea felt comforting to me, it felt very comforting—bringing these parts of my world together. For me, this was going to be *shiva*.

THE DAY OF MY "PARTY" — IT WASN'T A PARTY; IT WAS A RITUAL, it was an I-don't-know-what-it-was. It arrived. It was pouring rain. And I had baked, there was freshly brewed coffee—like at The Siegel Shop. I talked about my mother and said a *shehechyanu*. For a new ritual, for the newness of all of us being here together. It was a new beginning, a "pass through"—like the mikveh—you pass through and it's a new beginning. I needed to cry. I felt like... this is a good way for me to cry.

And people tried this on and that on, which for me is like the ultimate—because I do love helping dress my friends and seeing them look put together. I love that! And I channeled my mother:

"No, that's not you. You can look better than that."

"Mr. Matlaw, can you get this in a 14 for Mrs. Kaplowitz?"

"A man on horseback wouldn't notice...."

I was helping my girlfriends put outfits together. It meant more to me than I could have ever imagined. I was connecting my past with my current life. Searing into my heart, it felt like that, that my mother lived on—in my friends, in clothes, in me. I was making something permanent: that's what it felt like. It was such a help in moving through the grief.

I got teary-eyed to see an outfit of my mother's

on somebody else. It was sad; it was a mixed bag; it reinforced that, look, she really truly isn't here anymore. But it was joyful, too. Yes!—this Drizzle coat will live on in perpetuity.

The most powerful thing was giving more than 50 items—can you believe this?—to Julia Dunbar, whose office, until recently, was right next to mine. She was my mother's

My mother understood the importance of people feeling good about themselves, and the role that dressing well could play in a woman's life.

body, she fit perfectly. She literally came into work every day with an outfit of my mother's on! She'd say, "Look at what I'm wearing!" and it was both weird and nice and it always looked great on her. My mother would have loved the way Julia looked in her clothing.

THE THING ABOUT MY MOTHER'S CLOTHES IS THAT THEY PHYSICALLY TOUCHED HER; and now they are touching other people. This is what she did! She touched people—literally and figuratively; clothes were her vehicle for achieving that.

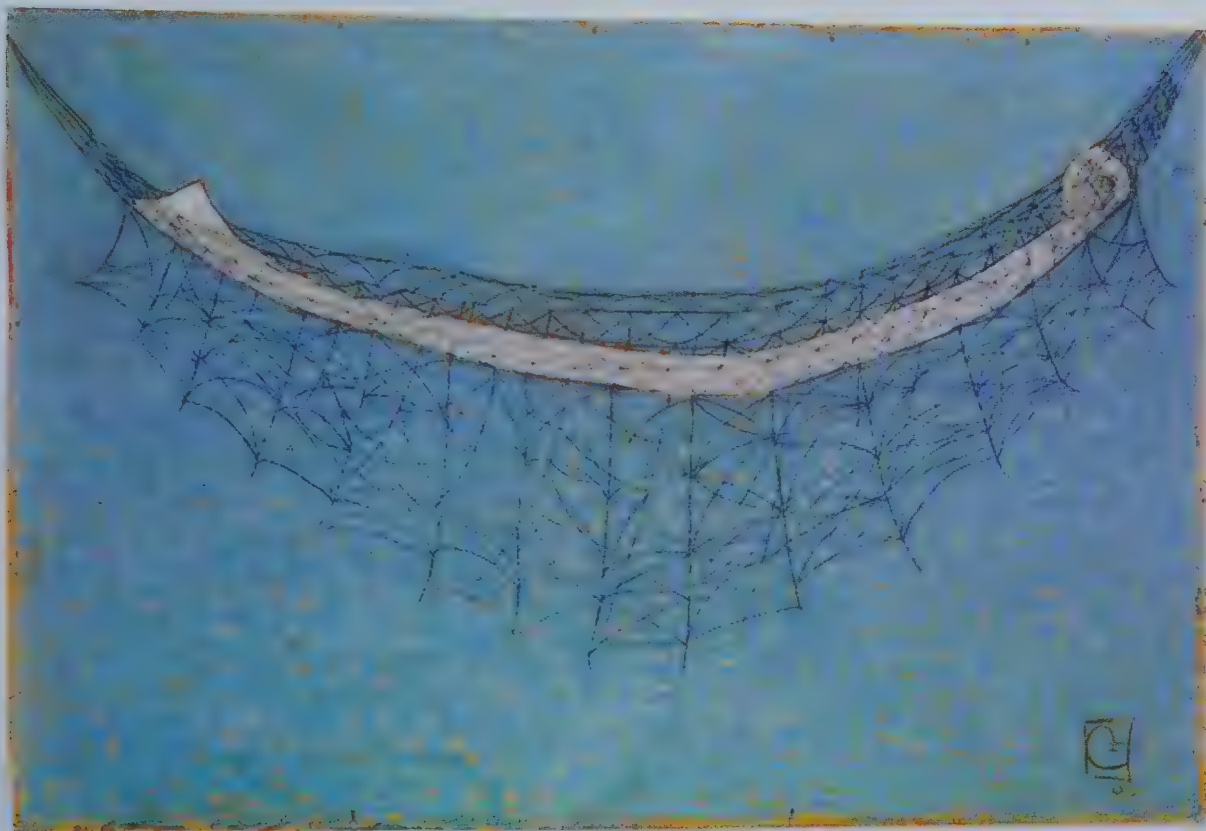
My mother, who was a very practical person, did not believe in therapy—she thought it was very self-indulgent—but she understood deeply the importance of people feeling good about themselves, and the role that dressing well could play in one's life. I think this is how she wanted to see the world: *She wanted it to look good*. She wasn't an aesthete, she was not *into* beauty. She liked tidiness, she liked organization. She liked to look at people "well put together"—this was her aesthetic. She liked to help others achieve that; this was an important role for her. For her, for Mrs. Epstein, for Mrs. Dowling. I didn't fully understand this until her funeral, and at my "give-away" I understood it even more deeply.

My "give-away"... well, *ceremony*. It was an enactment—like Passover. It was a re-enactment—like those living history people at Plymouth Rock with the dress-ups: Hear ye! Hear ye! The Siegel Shop—1923-1988! I don't know. It was about three big things in my life. My mother, my girlfriends, and clothing. Clothing... is huge in my life. ■

Jane Matlaw, Director of Community Relations at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, is involved in social justice work, and serves as personal shopper for her girlfriends.

Ilene Beckerman is the author/illustrator of Love, Loss and What I Wore and other books.





Heavenly Swing by FLORA COHEN

“Where Do I Belong?”

Latina Jews in New York

Latin-American Jews now make up a significant cohort in Miami, Winnipeg and many communities in North America. Many of them are women in their 20s and 30s, but not much is known about their lives, their plans, their views on women, the ways they see themselves and how they're perceived by others. **SONIA PEREL and KAREN GITELMAN WIERNIK of Argentina, GALIT MARKOVITCZ of Ecuador, CARLA BTESH of Panama, and ROSA EINHORN of Venezuela** had dinner around the Lilith conference table recently for some frank talk.

AMY GREENSTEIN, a former Lilith intern, RACHEL KRANSON, a Lilith contributing editor, and MELANIE WEISS, Lilith assistant editor, hosted. Here is Amy's story, first:

Growing up on Long Island, eating *arroz con pollo* was as common to me as eating *kneidelach*. And until I started getting confused looks and giggles from friends at the age of eight, I called slippers *conchletas*. When I reached my 20s, I wanted to know more about the Cuban and Romanian flavors that spiced my mother's speech and cooking. That's when I learned about my family's buried treasures.

When my mother's family left Romania, they moved to Cuba. My mother lived in Havana from the age of eight to the age of 15. After painstakingly learning Spanish and building up a clothing business, the family thrived there. But when Castro came to power, they begrudgingly left their new island home and moved to the United States.

When they left Cuba, they were not allowed to take the belongings that they had worked so hard to acquire. They buried their most precious treasures underneath the floor, hoping to return one day and reclaim them. More important to me than finding the objects themselves is to unearth more of my family's history.

In my professional life, I've followed a path that has taught me about my cultural background. I helped found Judios Latinos, bringing Latin American Jews together for cultural events in New York. And I work as the assistant director of young leadership development at HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society—the organization that, by no coincidence, resettled my mother and thousands of Latin American Jews displaced as a result of the 2001 Argentinian economic crisis. Knowing the hardships my mother had to overcome—she came alone to the U.S. at 16—has given me a deep appreciation for the difficulties immigrants face today.

The Latina Jews we invited to talk with us at Lilith were immigrants of choice. Their lives were stable in their countries of origin, but they came here to seek out new cultural and social opportunities. Unlike young Russian-American Jewish women Lilith has profiled in the past, these Latin-American Jewish women still feel pulled back to their home countries, often—and sometimes ambivalently—travelling back and forth. Their circumstances could hardly be more different from my mother's. But the Latin-Jewish culture shared by both my mother and this cohort of women remains a hidden treasure to most Jews in the United States, who aren't aware that Buenos Aires is home to the second largest diaspora Jewish community, let alone that there are Spanish-speaking Jews at all.

[During the process of transcribing our conversation with these women, we received the sad news that Karin Wiernik, after battling a difficult illness, had passed away. And soon after, my mother died suddenly as a result of a severe asthma attack. I dedicate this article to their lives and to their memory.]

LILITH: What's life like for Jewish women in your home country?

CARLA BTESH: In Panama's Jewish community, Sephardic girls get married at 18. Most teenagers—men and women—don't go to college. Now that's changing, especially for men. But Panama is a very traditional society. We started in Syria, also a traditional society, so there's not such a difference. But I went to college, my sister went to college, so did many of my friends. Still, I am generalizing about marriage at 18: every weekend someone gets married, at 18, 19. A girl my age who is not married, people think what is wrong?

SONIA PEREL: And generally the Sephardic Latin Jews are not the ones who come here.

ROSA EINHORN: A lot of Latin countries are very conservative, and girls get married very young. Good Catholic values.

CARLA: The aunt of a friend of mine, her daughter got married at 23. The daughter said, if I don't get married this year my mother will charge rent. She may have been joking, but truth underlay her humor. In Jewish Orthodox Sephardic communities all around the world, girls get married young. I think Ashkenazim get married much later.

LILITH: Is your situation—as a woman—different here?

GALIT MARKOVITZ: Here it's normal to get married and continued working. In Latin America, less so. It's possible, but not normal.

KARIN GITELMAN WIERNIK: In Argentina, in my generation, there are a lot of women professionals. Things are changing also because of the economy; both men and women *need* to work.

CARLA: Things are different there. Men don't let women be themselves. A majority of women don't travel without their husbands, for example, although of course some do.

ROSA: But here [in North America] you have to be everything, so it's difficult to be a woman. You have to be a mom and make a six figure salary! Here, you have to be good at everything, especially in New York.

SONIA: Gender roles, although there is variation among classes, are still very traditional [in Latin America]. There's still

a sense of patriarchy. You really feel it being there and coming from here. It's more like the U.S. 50 years ago, before feminism. A lot of stuff has happened with feminist thought and the feminist movement in U.S., and there it has been untouched. It's like traveling back in time.

GALIT: And Catholics are even more traditional.

SONIA: Abortion is still not legal in Argentina.

LILITH: Are Jews more liberal in general than the rest of the population?

CARLA: Not in Panama! Being Jewish in Argentina is very different. Women in Argentina are very tough, strong, very different from other Latin American countries.

SONIA: In Argentina, the Jewish population is more open, more accepting, than the Catholic part of the population...

GALIT: In Ecuador, it is a given that Jewish women will get the same level of education as men. That means going to college and also doing their master's.

LILITH: Would you say that you're a feminist?

GALIT: Well, I want to grow as a woman. A woman should be able to work. I don't know if that means I am a feminist or not.

ROSA: I think family values are very important, but so is the professional side. For my mother, I think family will always come first.

SONIA: I want to offer more of a definition of feminism, because feminism can be defined in so many ways. It's part of the political project. Do I think there is still a long way to go for women? Yes. Do I think it's unfortunate that feminism has gotten a bad rap? I do. So to answer the question in those terms, yes, I would definitely consider myself a feminist.

KARIN: I think women need the same rights as men and they still need to fight for them, and women have been denigrated over the centuries. I agree with all of that. But I think, unconsciously, I am not so feminist. Because when I chose a career, I didn't think about making money. I worked five years for free, and I didn't care about that! For men, it's different. They feel culturally that they need to make money in order to have a family! So I relegate my own job for his. I don't think I'm less than him because I'm in the field of education, but I make less money. And I feel comfortable with him making money, and not me.

CARLA: I don't call myself feminist, but I absolutely think that women deserve and need to be independent and, if they choose, to work, whether or not they are married. If I hadn't gone to college, I wouldn't be able to be here and have these opportunities, not just to make money, but also to feel good about myself. But we shouldn't go over the edge: while women should be independent, always studying, growing as a woman, mother, and wife, they should remember that family is also important.

GALIT: Latin American women are more family oriented than career oriented. We want to have kids, and...

CARLA: Most women get married young, but it doesn't mean that everybody is like that. Many work.

LILITH: What about being a Jew here?

KARIN: I come from Argentina and I found Forest Hills, in Queens. I wanted to be in a Jewish environment, in a good

place for kids, with a Jewish nursery school. But most Jewish schools here were too religious for me; we are more cultural. We sent them to school for Israelis, who understand cultural Jewishness, but it's hard for my kids, because it's not for them, they are not Israeli.

ROSA: Where do we fit in here Jewishly? At home [in Venezuela] we had such strong Jewish secular backgrounds, but here it's defined religiously.

LILITH: There's some tension between religious and secular expressions of Judaism. Did you have a religious background?

CARLA: I did. I went to a Jewish school where they teach you religion, how to pray, how to observe the holidays, Shabbat principles. Panama is a very Orthodox community.

LILITH: What do you mean by Orthodox?

CARLA: I was going to bring that up! It doesn't mean the same thing here. I consider myself Orthodox, and my synagogue at home is Orthodox. But I don't keep Shabbat. Orthodox in Panama is different—if you are Jewish, you belong to an Orthodox synagogue, you have Shabbat dinners every Friday with the family, strictly do the holidays, etc.. Basically, being Orthodox in Panama means that you are very traditional in your observation of practices, whereas in the U.S. it means that you are very religious in your beliefs.

Carla Btesh, 35, is a graduate student in the NYU Masters program in Hospitality Industries. She has been involved with many Jewish and women's charities in Panama, and in New York with Jewish charities focusing on Israel.

Rose Einhorn, 29, was born in Caracas and moved to New York in 2001 to work as a risk and finance professional.

Karin Gitelman Wiernik lived in Argentina and Israel before moving with her family to Queens, New York. She worked in education.

Galit Markovitz, 32, works in the Latin American private banking division of Bank Leumi International in New York, where she settled following an education that spanned Ecuador, Israel, and Florida.

Sonia Perel, 36, works as a programmer for the International Latino Film Festival of San Francisco. After living in Paris, Bologna and New York, she has returned to live in Buenos Aires.

GALIT: In Ecuador, being Jewish was also being part of Jewish organizations that help the community. But here the Jewish organizations I'm involved with are about Israel; they involve internationals and it makes me feel more at home.

KARIN: Here in American synagogues they pray in English, not in Hebrew! In Argentina they talk in Spanish, but they pray in Hebrew.

ROSA: It wasn't particularly religious in Venezuela, it was more JCC. The synagogue was Orthodox, but more people didn't go, especially not women. It wasn't the main point, the main point was being part of the community.

CARLA: Panama's community has become more religious in

every way; priorities have changed. When I was a kid, I went to school with non-Jews; non-Jews wanted to go to Jewish schools. Today, there are no non-Jews in the Jewish schools. And I think it's wrong; it's important to interact. Religion is a good thing, it's part of your identity, but it's not everything. You have to be able to interact with people.

KARIN: In Argentina, there's more pluralism, because it's a bigger community. You can find Conservative, Orthodox, but you can also find very strong secular institutions. Especially Zionist institutions, because the Zionist movement was very popular in Argentina. Americans don't always understand how large our Jewish community is—In B.A. [Buenos Aires], we have a McDonald's that is kosher!

LILITH: Do Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews mix?

SONIA: In Argentina, communities are separate. People still use terms for "Russians" and "Turks." But many more are Ashkenazi Jews—and they look down on the Sephardic community.

KARIN: Yes, the older generation thinks they are not educated, that they are more traditional and family oriented. That is the stereotype, not always true.

LILITH: So how are Jews viewed from the outside?

GALIT: The phrase "For the death of a Jew"—I might have heard it about three times in my life. I was at a Christmas din-

ner [in Ecuador], and someone made that as a toast. I was the only Jew there. It comes from the Church. And it happened to me once when I was in college. Someone said, "Don't act like a Jew." They don't even know what a Jew is, because there are so few. They don't know who we are. But it is not anti-Semitism, just cultural. It's weird. Here, everything is so diverse and dynamic that you don't really feel it. Not in New York at least.

KARIN: Argentina has it. They allowed all the Nazis to enter, and then there was the profanation of cemeteries. Two terrorist attacks on Jewish schools. I remember at the time that the press was saying that they were Jewish, and also Argentinian. They were making the distinction, like Jews were not also



Nun-in-the-box by FLORA COHEN

Argentinian. Many South American people do not even know that there are Jews in their countries. They don't realize people are Jewish unless they are Lubavitch, dress "Jewish."

CARLA: In Panama, since Jews run so much of the economic life, people know about Jews, Jewish holidays, and Jewish practices. But there's a lot of ignorance about how Jews and Israel are related.

ROSA: I haven't felt any anti-Semitism in New York.

KARIN: I don't feel the anti-Semitism here, but I feel the racism—against South Americans!

LILITH: Do you think racism works the same here as in South America?

KARIN: In Argentina we don't have black people—they've killed them all! So they have different kinds of racism, not against black people but against refugees from Bolivia who came to Argentina, etc.

CARLA: A French person in Panama once put a swastika on my father's car, but a Panamanian would never have done that!

ROSA: In (Venezuela) Jews are considered part of the high class, Europeans.

LILITH: You all describe coming from quite privileged backgrounds, economically. Then you come to the U.S., and because you speak Spanish people assume you're uneducated, poor, need a green card.

CARLA: I realized if I speak Spanish in school [in the U.S.] people would associate me with the Mexicans, and any third

world country. However, things have changed, and to speak Spanish is an advantage.

SONIA: I know a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman who, once she spoke Spanish [in the U.S.], felt that people looked at her differently. This happened a little differently to me when I was with my mother in California. No one ever thought that we were speaking Spanish. They thought we were speaking Italian! They couldn't associate our looks with Spanish! This happened consistently.

GALIT: It's an advantage. People in restaurants treat me much better, they don't think I would speak Spanish but when they realize I do, they treat me well, they and I feel at home.

CARLA: Americans think Latina women are not smart and are uneducated—but that's all wrong. Not that we're better, but it's different. We are very educated. But Americans have that conception of all Latin Americans. When people in America hear Spanish, they think the speaker is very poor, uneducated, and unknowledgeable.

GALIT: I feel and am Latin American, even though my parents are European! You are where you grew up.

LILITH: How do you feel about North American Jews?

GALIT: I came here because I wanted to meet more Jewish people. But if they ask me where I want to be in future, I don't know where I want to be. I don't know if I want my kids here and raise them as Americans. I feel I would miss the values of Latin America for my children.

KARIN: I'm raising my kids here, but it's hard. I think that the nuclear family is the most important thing, so no matter where we are, my kids receive a lot from their parents, who are Latin, who are Jewish. They live in a different society and will always be different. But I value the familial context. I am establishing myself here, though I don't know if it's the best place.

CARLA: New York also has a lot to offer because it's very diverse. It's a great opportunity to grow up here. But I don't know. I'm here now, so I think it's a great place to be..

SONIA: I want to go back. I had half my childhood in Argentina, and from 10 on here. From my own experience having had a childhood in both places, it's very crystal clear that I am having kids there. You need more than a nuclear family to raise a family. You need a whole community.

GALIT: Many Israelis say—"I'm definitely going back home to raise my kids there." But I don't have that option. The Ecuadorian Jewish community is so small, and getting smaller.

CARLA: I was in Brooklyn on Shabbat on Friday, and was very homey, communal. They even had maids! So maybe I don't need to be in Panama to have that warmth, that community. It reminded me of having a dinner with my family. There was not much difference between my family and theirs. ■

For a list of recent books by Latin American Jewish women authors, and to join the conversation, visit Lilith.org. To bring to your community a conversation about Jewish diversity, call Lilith at 888-2-LILITH.

Painter Flora Cohen is a second-generation Colombian Jew. She currently lives and works in Miami.

Salsa, Merengue... and the HORA?

An Anthropologist Explains

by RUTH BEHAR

I am struck by how culturally diverse the Jewish experiences of women have been in Latin America. Our ancestors came from a range of places, including Poland, Russia, Turkey, and Syria. They brought traditions with them that meshed with the local Latin American traditions. The highly Orthodox Sephardic community in Panama is not going to offer women the same possibilities for self-expression and independence as the secular Jewish community that exists in Buenos Aires. Neither resembles at all the contemporary Jewish community in Cuba, where the majority of Jewish women today are converts married to men of Jewish heritage who have recently rediscovered their Jewishness after decades of revolutionary atheism. Jews crafted different Latin American identities depending on where they landed and whether they formed large communities—as in Argentina—or smaller ones—as in Panama and Cuba. Anti-Semitism also varied among places; it never took root in Cuba, perhaps due to vital African traditions and lax Catholicism, while in Argentina it has been a thorn in the everyday life of the Jews since the days of the Shoah.

We can all call ourselves Jewish Latinas because we share the Spanish language and a common culture that is Jewish and Latin American. But each of us also represents a unique fusion of “Jewish” and “Latina.”

Unlike the Jewish Latinas who came later—fleeing repressive regimes in Chile and Argentina in the 1970s or looking for better economic opportunities in the decades that followed—Jewish women from Cuba could not go back and visit their homeland. The U.S. embargo made travel to Cuba virtually impossible and the Cuban government considered all those

who left the island after the revolution to be counter-revolutionaries and traitors. Unable to return home, the women came to view themselves as exiles. The best they could do was create a Jewish-Cuban island in a little corner of New York City, and this they did with a mixture of joy and sorrow. I think we learn something interesting about current experiences by spotlighting this earlier set of Latina Jews.

BETTY FRIEDAN’S “FEMININE MYSTIQUE” and the Cuban Revolution played out together in the lives of five Cuban-Jewish women who settled in New York after Fidel Castro came to power. Their experiences are absent from Betty Friedan’s map, and more generally, from the map of Jewish women’s history. In Miami, Jewish Cubans are so visible as a distinct community that they call themselves Jubans; the tiny fragment of the community that settled in New York offers a different perspective on how Cuban-Jewish women immigrants sought to maintain their identities as Cubans and as Jews in the city we think is diverse, but which nevertheless has had trouble accepting the cultural fusion represented by these women.

My mother, Rebeca Behar, with my Aunt Sylvia, Sylvia Steinberg, and their friends Miriam Perkal, Nina Mueller and Fanny Seinuk, formed part of “El Grupo”—“The Group,” an informal group of Cuban-Jewish couples who arrived in New York with their small children in tow, and who met every Sunday throughout the 1960s and 1970s to eat Cuban black beans and rice and reminisce about Cuba. The women were born in the mid-1930s in Cuba, married in the mid-1950s, immigrated to New York in the early 1960s; each had two children, a boy and a girl; they all speak Spanish more easily than English.

While Friedan was bemoaning the rise of mind-numbing housewifery in American suburbs during the early 1960s, these Cuban-Jewish women were in the throes of making major decisions about their lives and their future. Fanny put it this way: “As women, we had to leave everything we had. Whether you wanted your children to grow up in that system, or you wanted to have free enterprise, that was a decision you had to make. We really had to grow up fast.” Cuban-Jewish women experienced a very short-lived version of the feminine mystique in the mid to late 1950s. The Cuban Revolution, followed by their sudden migration to the United States, brought a downturn in their race and class status. They became, at least in their early years as immigrants, akin to women of color in the United States, for whom the mystique, enshrined within the nuclear family structure, was an unattainable luxury.

Middle-class women of my mother’s generation in Cuba engaged in courtship as young teenagers, even as pre-teens, married around the age of 20, and had children immediately. Veronica Maya, a leader in the Sephardic community in Miami, started dating her future husband at the age of 12. Her women friends joke, *Cuando ella se quitó los Pampers se hizo novia de Moisés*—“When she stopped wearing her Pampers is when she took Moisés as her boyfriend.” The sexuality of white middle-class women had to be controlled through marriage.

THE SPLIT BETWEEN ASHKENAZI AND Sephardic Jews existed then too. Throughout Latina America, it was common for Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews to congregate in separate synagogues and social circles. Ashkenazi women in Cuba were told by their mothers, “Better to marry a *goy* than a *turco*”—not only did the Turks (Sephardic Jews) not speak Yiddish, they were known to have bad tempers and to keep their women locked up in the house. My mother challenged this convention by marrying my father, a Sephardic Jew. The story my mother tells is that after she finished high school and a year of secretarial school, my grandmother told her it was time for her to find a job. She mentioned this in passing to my father, to whom she was then

engaged, and he replied, "Then we're getting married! No woman I'm with is going to work!" But by the 1950s, a Jewish woman didn't have to be married to a Sephardic husband to be confined to the home. That had become the social order of the day.

Yet the women of El Grupo had all worked before getting married. As Ashkenazi women, they were accustomed

there were more women than men."

In Cuba, Jews didn't suffer from discrimination or persecution. But Jewish difference was very marked in everyday life. Jews were called *polacos*, or Poles, no matter what country they were from. Ashkenazi Jewish women, especially if they were light-skinned and blue or green-eyed, tended to be singled out in public. Nina didn't like it when

In the 1960's Jews had only recently become "white folks" in America.

to seeing their immigrant mothers working with their fathers in their family businesses, in contrast to Sephardic women, who never worked outside the home. But the women didn't think that helping out in the family business counted as real work; they considered it a responsibility. All the women stopped working regularly when they married in the mid-1950s, but they didn't lose their taste for work outside the home. In the United States also, women could work—in a business owned by their parents or shared with their husbands.

In Cuba, as in the U.S. South, middle-class women could afford to have domestic workers (usually women of color). But as immigrants, they had to do their own housework, the cooking, and the child care; they also either had to go out and work along with their husbands, or help their mothers eke out a living.

ALTHOUGH THE WOMEN HAD BEEN born and raised on an island that had been a backyard colony of the United States, they felt they were more in the vanguard than the Americans they encountered. They were immigrants in a new country, but they felt culturally superior to Americans. When I asked Fanny, who'd studied accounting and married an engineer, what she thought of the idea of the feminine mystique, she replied, "I didn't feel women were being put down in Cuba at that time. Women didn't have to prove anything to anybody. Not like American women. I felt the difference when I was looking for a job. Right away I realized women were not equal here. I had always been equal. In Cuba, in the university, in accounting, sometimes

they called her a *polaca* in Cuba. "I felt insulted. They were doing it to bother you. 'Look, there goes the *polaquita*.' It was demeaning." But while the women were uncomfortable about the way the foreignness of their white Jewish identity was marked in Cuba, when they came to New York, they wanted to be recognized as white and Jewish. They wanted to hold on to the privileged white middle-class status they'd had in Cuba.

Once in New York, the women chose to settle in distinctly Jewish neighborhoods. They were Spanish speakers with an intense nostalgia for Cuba, but they didn't want to live in Spanish Harlem or in other Latino neighborhoods. Real estate agents were confused by the mix of identities they represented and didn't know how to situate them in the racialized map of the city. Miriam said that when she called one agent, he heard her Latina accent and assumed she was Puerto Rican. She asked about homes in Jewish and Italian neighborhoods. The agent insisted nothing was available. Miriam told her husband they needed to go to the man's office in person, "so he can see our faces, so he can see that we're white."

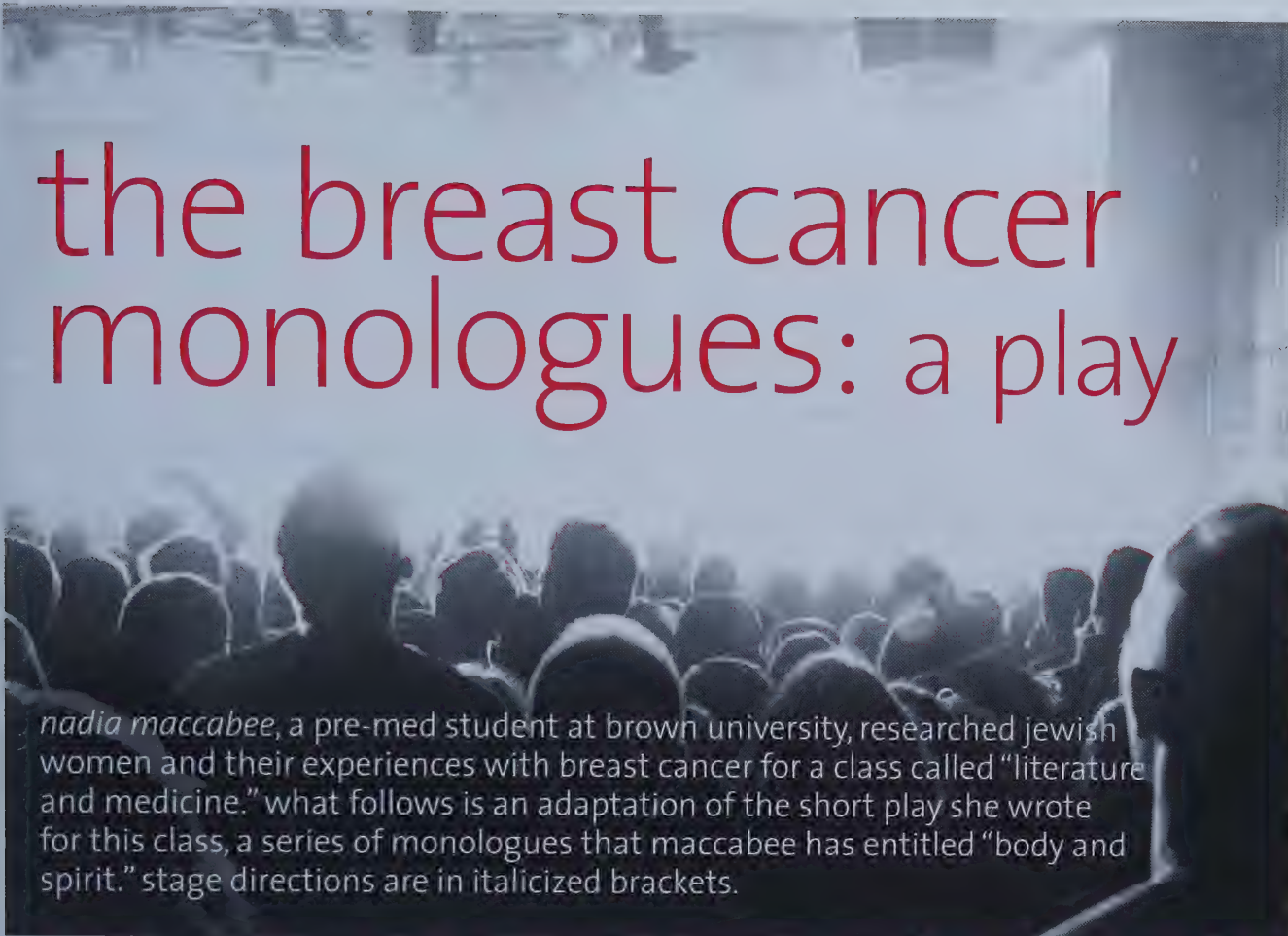
In the 1960s Jews had only recently become "white folks" in America. Miriam's need to be recognized as "white" was not only a matter of race and class but of cultural identity. "I was a Cuban Jew," she says. "I was Cubana and I would say that with pride. I wasn't Puerto Rican. I wasn't Mexican. I was Cuban and that was a big deal. We thought we were better than anyone else. People would ask, 'Did you have a television in Cuba?' I would say, 'You're very misinformed. We had the

latest model cars, we had televisions. Our peso was equivalent to your dollar. But that animal came and ruined everything.'" The curious thing was that Miriam could feel so confident at a time when she was accepting used snowsuits for her son, her own thin coat could barely keep her warm, and she and her family were sleeping in an aunt's house on a bedspread on the floor.

For the women of my mother's generation, a return to Latin America was unlikely, though their Jewishness was flexible enough to allow them to maintain their attachment to Cuban food, music, language, and culture. But they needed to continually explain their identity. As Miriam noted, "I'm white, I speak Spanish and I'm Jewish. It doesn't make sense to them. Ninety percent of the people I meet don't get it. They can imagine you being from any country, but not that you're Jewish. That they can't understand."

THE WOMEN OF EL GRUPO WANTED TO have their cake and eat it too. They were proud of their Cubanness and held on to the Spanish language. They danced salsa at bar mitzvahs and weddings, and they continued to cook Cuban food, substituting chicken for pork in their tamales. At the same time, they loved to tropicalize Jewish foods; they stuffed their hamantaschen with guava paste. They were willing to work among Latinos, among whom they felt culturally very comfortable, but they didn't want to live among Latinos who weren't Jewish like themselves. Their race and class prejudices kept them separate. They wanted their children to grow up as Jews. They sought to be recognized as white Jewish women, so they could "pass" unmarked, but inevitably their Latino accents and strong ties to Cuba also made them "other." ■

Ruth Behar is the author of The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart and other books. Her documentary, "Adio Kerida: A Cuban Sephardic Journey," has been shown in film festivals around the world. An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba will be published this fall. She is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. A version of this article was presented at the conference "A Jewish Feminine Mystique? Jewish Women in Postwar America."



the breast cancer monologues: a play

nadia maccabee, a pre-med student at brown university, researched jewish women and their experiences with breast cancer for a class called "literature and medicine." what follows is an adaptation of the short play she wrote for this class, a series of monologues that maccabee has entitled "body and spirit." stage directions are in italicized brackets.

rachel green, 28, ultra-orthodox teacher

Hmmm...am I frightened? Because I'm starting chemo next week? Yes, I am, but not for the reasons you think. I'm not afraid of the throwing up or being tired all the time. I dread those things—sure—but I'm not afraid of them.

My *Abba* was sick for a very long time. As the only daughter, I stayed home and took care of him while all my brothers studied at the yeshiva. I was the last one of my class to marry, not that I'm complaining, but for ten years I took care of Abba while my mother worked, and so I have seen plenty of sickness. I've been prepared for it—I *know* it. What I'm terrified of is not being able to have children. Last week Dr. Weis looked at a clipboard, not at me, as he read down a list of chemotherapy side effects. "Of course you can't get pregnant during treatment," he said, "and there is some risk of permanent infertility." He kept going down the list. I couldn't breathe.

My mother always told me that an Orthodox woman's two happiest moments in life are the bar mitzvah of her eldest son and the wedding of her first daughter. I knew that because I married late, I'd probably only have six children rather than eight or nine, but I never imagined none. The total shame! The loneliness! The pitying looks at synagogue. The charity Shabbos invitations. I never imagined. No *brit milah* for our infant son,

no little bodies to kiss goodnight or cook special foods for. No dirty fingerprints to wipe off doorposts. [*Beat.*] No one to say *Kaddish* for David and me.

God commands, "Be fruitful and multiply." The rabbis say this means we should have at least two children. Sometimes I go to the mirror and look at my naked chest. I can't see them, but I can imagine those cancerous cells growing, reproducing relentlessly beneath my flesh. Isn't it funny, the irony of it, that I might be denied the blessing of children because these microscopic cells won't stop reproducing?

jeffrey bloomberg, 43, patent attorney; son of breast cancer patient sonia bloomberg

So, you want to know about my mother. She was diagnosed in June, 2003. June 14th at a 2:15 appointment. Pretty classic—she'd felt the lump while in the shower. Lumpectomy didn't work, wasn't enough, they started her on chemo.

You see, there are these genes, BRCA1 and BRCA2—normally they act as tumor suppressor genes, you know, they keep cells from growing out of control, but if they are mutated the woman has a higher risk of developing breast cancer. Or

ovarian cancer. It makes sense, the names I mean—BR is “breast” and CA is for cancer. Less than 1% of the general population has a BRCA mutation, but 1 in 40 Ashkenazi Jewish women have it. 1 in 40!

That doesn’t mean that all those women with the mutation will get cancer of course, but it means they are more *likely* to get it. Generally women—without the BRCA mutation—have a 12% likelihood of getting breast cancer—now I’m not scoffing at that, that is no small beans. But a Jewish woman—or any other woman, for that matter—with the BRCA mutation has an 85% likelihood of getting the cancer in her life. Wait, I think that’s the stat, yeah, 85%. Those are some terrible odds!

amy bloomberg-rich, 41, defense attorney; sister of jeffrey, daughter of cancer patient sonia bloomberg

After our mom started chemo, they told me I should get tested. Tested for what? I asked. It’s not contagious! Her doctor told me to get genetically tested. He said I should find out if I had bad genes before I made “uninformed life decisions.” [*Says the next three words slowly.*] “Uninformed life decisions”—was that the new euphemism for “having children”? Or just for keeping my potentially cancerous breasts? I thought about getting tested. Seriously, I even wrote out two opposing opening statements: one arguing pro and the other con. [*Laughing.*] Oh yeah, I even delivered the opening statements to myself in front of my mirror just to see if one looked more convincing.

jeffrey bloomberg continues:

The numbers are crazy! We Jews make up only 2% of the US population, but one-quarter of this country’s BRCA mutation carriers are M.O.T.s—sorry, Members of the Tribe. Why? you ask. Why us? I was plagued—huh, “plagued,” interesting word choice—anyhow, was plagued with this question. Basically, they think the gene mutation just randomly came about 2000 years ago in Eastern Europe. Basically...because Jews in Eastern Europe were really isolated and kept in small pockets of communities, mechanisms of genetic drift and the “founder effect” came into play.

Ummm, how do I explain? [*Beat.*] In population genetics, there’s a very very small chance that any given mutation will occur. But in a small population, you know, like the Jews, a couple instances of bad luck have a much more pronounced effect. Oh, and this German guy defined the “founder effect”—which is when a small population, like Ashkenazi Jews, have less genetic differences than the population at large has, and so if they mostly inbreed, that group will have people more genetically similar. Not only will they look more alike as a result, but they’ll have more mutations in common than other people. Most of the Jews in the U.S. are Ashkenazi Jews, which is why this is really an issue here.

I’ve never really liked science. Biology was okay, but chemistry was a disaster. But now.... I hang on to the words of the articles I read like a drug. I need the words.

amy bloomberg-rich continues:

Why *not* get tested? For hundreds of years, they’ve said we have “bad genes” before they tortured us, before they killed us. Genocide, like the Holocaust, was based on the claim that Jews are tainted with mutant genes. Skulls were measured by Nazis to prove this.

I know that all subsets of people have their own susceptibility to different genetic diseases. That everyone has mutations. But, this looks different to people who hate Jews. Yeah, they’re still out there. I know this is irrational, but I can’t let myself get genetically tested. I can’t stomach the idea that someone could theoretically use my test to justify a claim that Jews are born inferior.

jeffrey bloomberg ends:

I don’t know what else to say. Mom and I... we can’t really talk about it, I mean her feelings, and the lump, too, I guess. I go with her to the hospital and don’t know what to say, what to do. [*Beat.*] I hold her hand and, well, this scenario is so new to me. So I went to the library and learned everything I could about breast cancer, about Jewish women and breast cancer and *that* I can talk about when I go to the hospital with her. That’s how I say, “I’m with you, mom, I love you”—by talking clinical, intellectual, but also getting, feeling closer.

noah gordon, 63, conservative rabbi

It was five years ago, on a Sunday afternoon, that a congregant of mine first came to my office at Beth Israel synagogue and asked me about genetic testing. Should she get tested? She was the first to ask, but not the last. So, I started researching what the rabbis had to say about this testing and what halakhic precedent there is.

Of course, all over the Torah is the guiding principle of *pikuah nefesh*—preservation of life above all else. So I really need to tell female congregants that Judaism says they have to consider this test, because this test could protect their lives.

You won’t believe this, but more than 1500 years ago, Talmudic scholars described a genetic test performed by rabbis! If a baby boy bled heavily after circumcision, the rabbis excused any of the baby’s brothers born later from this ancient ritual! They also exempted any of the boy’s cousins from circumcision. But if the father of one of these children remarried, the rabbis restored the ceremony. [*Smiling broadly.*] Get it? Even 1500 years ago, they knew that hemophilia runs in families from mothers to sons. Now, of course, we call that pattern “x-linked recessive,” but they knew it then!

But with breast cancer the issue of testing is not just one of *pikuah nefesh*. It’s not so simple. Even if a woman tests positive for a mutation, it doesn’t necessarily mean she’s going to get cancer, and if she tests negative it doesn’t mean she *won’t* get cancer. If a Jewish woman doesn’t have the gene, she can still get cancer. Even if she tests positive for the, what is it, the...mutation and has the risk of cancer, what can she do about it besides having her breasts removed? She can have her

breasts reconstructed after surgery, but she can't yet have the gene, or the mutation, replaced in her offspring's embryos!

Halakha talks about *teruf ha-daat*, an unsettled mind, and says that peace of mind is very important. So if gaining knowledge won't do anything but cause distress, some women feel it's better not to find out the information at all! I sympathize with this! Basically, there is nothing a positive test can tell a Jewish woman except that she should stay vigilant. A Jewish woman does not need to be told to worry! Have you ever met a Jewish woman who didn't worry enough? Trust me, she worries already.

jess hoffman, 29, graduate student

"Get over it!" My boyfriend told me. "Stop dwelling on something you have no control over." That insensitive asshole! How dare he minimize the pain, the all-consuming fear that I'm experiencing. Has he ever gone through something like this? No! He has no right to judge.

I am a "previvor." Yeah, I've renamed it. I tested positive for the BRCA1 mutation and the doctors told me I am an "unaffected carrier" because I don't yet have breast cancer. Unaffected?! Unaffected my ass!! I'm a *previvor*, I have been surviving this predisposition to cancer for the past two years! Should I still have kids? Should I take Tamoxifen?! Should I have my breasts removed?! My ovaries?! Yeah, I've given us "unaffected carriers" a name. I want us to have a voice!

susan mayhan, 72, sculptor

Well, both of my sisters had breast cancer, so it occurred to me that I would probably be a candidate. My younger sister died of cancer and not a day goes by that I don't see her face. And think of her. Like many women, I discovered a lump in my breast while in the shower. My left breast. I called my oncologist right away, and he was dumbfounded that I had called him at home. "You called me at home for *that*!?" he said. I kept him as my doctor—what can I say? He was my internist, too. I had a mastectomy at the beginning of '98 and then chemo.

It's amazing how much support I got from the community. People visited every day. I'm not talking about just close friends—*other* people. Even acquaintances, whom I'd known vaguely at the JCC, called and said, "I had breast cancer five years ago, fifteen years ago..." or visited my home. My friend Esther would bring a book each week and read to me, because she knew I loved to read, but was often too tired. That was wonderful. This Jewish tradition of *bikur cholim*—you know, that we're prescribed to visit the sick—it's so unique, so important. Cancer can be so isolating, but people were always stopping by. (*She yells to her husband in the other room.*) Jacob, do you remember that? All those people?

People afflicted with serious illnesses often ask, "Why me?" I never asked the stupid "Why me?" I think it's stupid—there's no one to answer this question. [*Beat.*] I'm not sure if cancer

changed my life so much. [*Yelling.*] Did it dear? Jacob says yes. I'm not sure in what ways.

rivka berkowitz, 35, hasidic mother & wife

I always loved my hair. It was this long, thick mane of brown curls. Before marrying, my mother bought me two wigs. One for every day, which is this one I'm wearing now, and one for special occasions. After Avram and I first got married, there were times I longed to take off the wig and dance through the streets with my real hair flowing behind me! But most of the time, I loved that Avram was the only man who would ever see my hair. And whenever he did, he buried his face in it, smelling it, running his hands through it. Treasuring me and the intimacy we shared. He said it made me look like a queen. Sometimes I'd walk through the streets singing, happy like a child with the secret. I had a crown of hair, hidden, beneath my wig just waiting for my husband to set free! Every morning when I put on the wig and tucked every last wisp of hair into it, I thanked *Hashem* for demanding modesty of me. I thanked *Hashem* for the depth it gave to my marriage. I put on that wig like I would imagine men put on a *tallis*—with a sense of duty and joy and God's presence all around me.

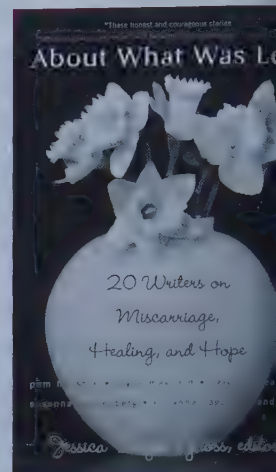
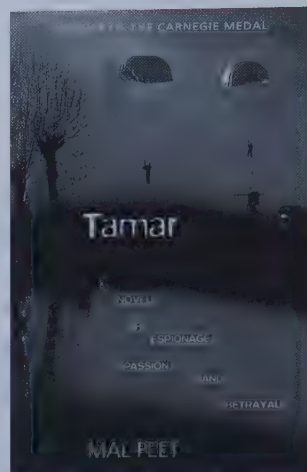
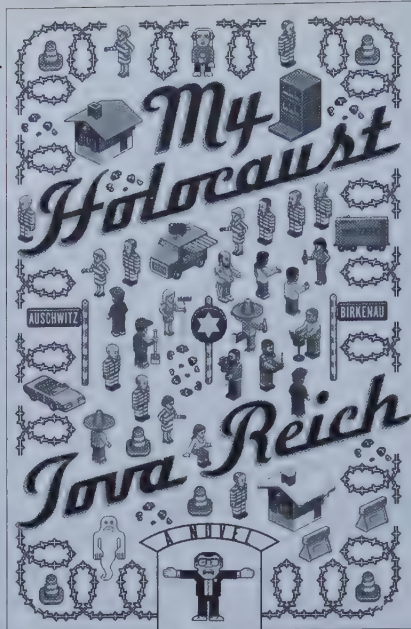
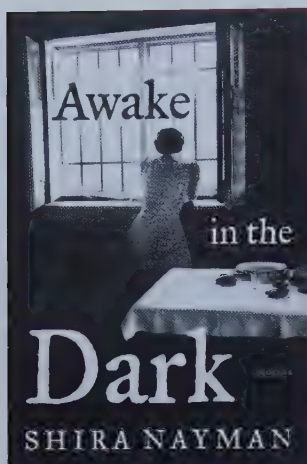
They tell you that chemotherapy makes you bald, but I just sort of imagined that I would wake up one day and my hair would be gone. I was not prepared to wake up to chunks of hair on my pillow, fallen out in the middle of the night. I was not ready to comb my hair and find many many clumps clinging to the teeth of the comb. To shower and see the dark strands cascading down the drain. Of course I still wear the same wig as *before*, but I don't hide a crown, I hide a disease. The secret I carry with me as I walk through the streets is different. It's no longer one of intimacy. It's a secret of shame.

julie adler, 13, daughter of debbie adler (deceased)

Yeah. My mom was sick for a while. Like three years with cancer before she died. Umm... every week at shul I stood up and said her name out loud before the *mi she'berakh* was sung. You know, they ask people to stand up in temple and say the names of people that God should heal. Well, I didn't know if God would actually hear her name or what, but I fell into this routine of standing up and saying it each week. One week at temple, I was in the bathroom and... I missed, I missed the prayer. I don't know why, I, like, felt so bad about not having said the *mi she'berakh* for my mom.

Sometimes I wonder if that's why it didn't work. But, anyhow, it didn't work, and she died. Now, before the *mi she'berakh*, I stand up. I mean, I don't say anything; I just stand up and sing for her. ■

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Returning to the Past, Regardless of Consequences

Shira Nayman's debut fiction collection, *Awake in the Dark* (Scribner, \$24.00), took me back to an icy November day in 1996 in a Lithuanian village where some 65,000 Jews had been murdered during WWII. It was a day of memorial and reconciliation. Jewish children and adults joined with those in the village, walking the long walk across a bridge, going first to the Jewish cemetery where kaddish was recited and where the children placed candles at the graves. This ceremony was followed by a service in the Catholic church, where a menorah had been placed on the altar. Later the children danced and sang Hebrew melodies, and later still, in an unheated room, there was a reception. A woman came up to me and I asked her why she had come to this occasion. "Perhaps," she said, "I too am Jewish and don't know it."

Nayman, a clinical psychologist, chronicles the split identities of those raised believing that their lives have taken a certain course, like any of us, but having fragments of memories or disruptions that would say otherwise. In story after story there is this nagging doubt, as if at any moment a small seam could give way and tremors

of an impending earthquake open the life wide and put the lie to all that a character believed to be the truth of her existence.

The author uses a narrative structural device that reinforces the sense of these broken identities—sections separated by time, location, and by narrator. For instance, in "The Lamp," the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Nazi officer alternates between her versions of events and those of her mother. The effect is to place a similar burden upon the reader as exists in the characters of the stories—the need to integrate disparate and traumatic experiences. In "Dark Urgings of the Blood," a psychiatrist and her patient appear initially as individuated but eventually merge as their histories seem to be identical. The psychiatrist asks: "Is this how a madman feels? Convinced that the impossible parameters of his vision—everything coming together *just so*, everything filled with threat, and all of it pointed toward *me*—is the absolute and fundamental truth?" And later, after finally initiating the questioning of her father, she says: "I think about my mother's principle: *No trespassing*. I feel a shock of shame...I want to...go back to the unruffled existence I led...to allow my father...to remain in the careful chamber he has made of his life, the past safely sealed away."

The narrators of these stories dare to cross the forbidden threshold, dare to return to the past regardless of the consequences. These are courageous stories about women who must find a way, once they have unmanned the schizophrenic division of their lives, to reintegrate the parts of their lives. They must face the taboo of breaking apart the parental marriage that has been based on agreed-upon silence about the past, allowing hideous secrets to come streaming out. Whether in breaking through a wall for the hidden message or forcing a lock on a metal box, the stories teach us about the dangers of secrets and the raw courage that it takes to bring the past into the light of the present.

MYRA SKLAREW

Fasten Your Seatbelts

Even the very title of the book, *My Holocaust* by **Tova Reich** (Harper Collins, \$24.95) is intentionally provocative. In truth, the same warnings posted above the gates of particularly nauseating roller-coasters ought to be printed in big letters on the front cover of this novel: This Is Not for The Faint of Heart. Stay Seated, Keep Your Seatbelts Firmly Fastened. There is absolutely no sacred cow that goes unslaughtered by Reich's rapier wit—she's a *shochet* for the best



of them, whether it's self-righteous Holocaust survivors, universal human rights advocates, Palestinians, Israelis, or Jewish nuns.

Yes, Jewish nuns: Nechama, the granddaughter of Holocaust *uber*-survivor Maurice Messer, has decided to become the ultimate *shanda* before the goyim. Not only is she turning her back on her Jewish heritage, but she has joined the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz, of all places, as a big obscene gesture to her family. And not just her family, but the family business: her grandfather, and her father, Norman Messer, run Holocaust Connections, Inc., a business which sells the moral capital of the Holocaust to the highest bidder, teaching corporations and nonprofits alike how to brand themselves (forgive the pun) with the moral imprimatur of Holocaust legitimacy.

Reich's novel opens on the ground at Auschwitz, where the wheeling and dealing takes place even in the gas chambers, as Messer and crew attempt to solicit funds for the future United States Holocaust Museum from ignorant-yet-guilty Jewish Americans. (Their confrontation with a boorish Israeli high school class and its rude teacher/chaperone is destined to become a classic.) The novel concludes at the United States Holocaust Museum, where, in the wake of a visit from a promi-

nent terrorist, the universalists claim that the museum should not commemorate just the Jewish Holocaust, but rather, all Holocausts—Native Americans, fur, Palestinian, etc.—and they take the museum and the Holocaust hostage, literally and figuratively.

Reich, no young upstart fresh on the scene, is a well-established award-winning writer in her 50s, the wife of unceremoniously ousted former United States

Girls and Sad History

There is a rich and varied tradition of Holocaust literature for young adults. Two recent additions to this genre, *Tamar* (Candlewick, \$17.99) and *The Book Thief* (Knopf, \$16.95), should be recognized for bringing less-known narratives of World War II—the stories, respectively, of the Dutch resistance and of a young girl in the German heartland.

“The family business was to sell the moral capital of the Holocaust to the highest bidder.”

Holocaust Museum director Walter Reich and the sister of activist Orthodox rabbi and rabble-rouser Avi Weiss. She is the insider's insider, but at no point in the book does she flaunt this status. Her words are hilarious and her plot for the most part seamlessly crafted.

This upsetting and biting book is a wild, brilliant intellectual roller-coaster of a satire. It would be hard to read it and not be offended. Maybe that is precisely the point.

JORDANA HORN

Mal Peet's *Tamar* moves between two stories. One focuses on Dutch resistance fighters during the Hunger Winter of 1944–1945. The other tells of Tamar, the British granddaughter of two resistance fighters, trying to understand the suicide of her beloved grandfather and the cryptic scavenger-hunt of messages he left for her. The story of two British trained Dutch resistance members and the brave patriots who sheltered and helped them is a vivid tale of espionage, love, and betrayal that will appeal to male

and female readers alike. The intricate details of how messages were encoded and discovery averted make for gripping reading. The story of the present-day Tamar is less successfully told—her journey to decode her family's secret, embarked on in the company of a conveniently appearing distant cousin from Holland, is never as interesting as the story of her grandparents. Nevertheless, *Tamar's* account of the suffering in Occupied Europe during World War II is not often addressed in Jewish circles, setting this book apart.

The Book Thief is entirely startling. The title character of this remarkable and unique novel is a young German girl whose impoverished mother has left her in the care of foster parents in a

carrying away the souls of the dead, allows his fascination with the girl to distract him from the horrors of his work, and ultimately to preserve her tale.

The Holocaust figures much more prominently in *The Book Thief* than in *Tamar*. Not only is one of the central characters of *The Book Thief* a hidden Jew, but Death himself, as he tells Leisel's story, often recounts his own work during that time, as he tenderly carried away millions of Jewish souls. Leisel is a wonderful character—wounded, brave, enduring terrible sorrow and remaining engaged with others and the world, but ultimately it is Death that steals this book and renders it unforgettable.

RAHEL LERNER

In the Bible's book of Ruth, Naomi went out "full" and came back empty. The phrase resonates for women who have miscarried.

small town outside Munich. The narrator, who sympathetically follows the girl from her journey with her mother and dying brother through the end of the war, is Death. As voiced by gifted writer **Markus Zusak**, Death is a busy bringer of souls, who tries to avert his eyes from "the leftover humans. The survivors. They're the ones I can't stand to look at, though on many occasions I still fail." Zusak brings to life the horrors the totalitarian Nazi regime wrought even on ethnic Germans: how it armed schoolyard bullies and made them masters of Hitler Youth, how it punished any kindness to the less fortunate, how its citizens starved while party officials flourished. Leisel finds refuge with her seemingly rough foster parents, and solace in the books she manages to steal. The continuing horrors culminate in the loss of virtually everyone and everything she has ever known in the Allied bombing of Munich, including her own story which she has painstakingly recorded. But Death, omniscient, exhausted from

the biblical book of Ruth. Commentators explain that Naomi was "full" in the sense that she was pregnant when she left the land of Israel for Moab, but she came back empty. The authors, Emily Bazelon and Dahlia Lithwick, both mention conversations with rabbis as the defining moments of comfort for them. Bazelon wisely discusses others helping her to "take my grief seriously" and Lithwick notes that there are "no scripts" for dealing with miscarriage.

There may be no scripts, but there is great comfort to be found in Caroline Leavitt's "The First Baby." Leavitt describes a book her friend Peter made for her titled "Smart Answers for Dumb Questions," such as "At least it wasn't a real baby yet," for which the response is "Yeah, and you're so insensitive you aren't a real person!"

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro's frank essay chronicles her initial ambivalence about having children, which turned to a yearning for them after a miscarriage. She describes a poignant moment when she and her husband say a personal Kaddish for their lost child. She closes with a scene in which she and her husband are driving to a baby shower. He muses that the miscarried baby would have been 28 and they could have been grandparents by now. The emptiness doesn't end even 28 years on, after the birth of two subsequent children.

Miranda Field, a poet, writes about her thoughts on a memory garden for miscarried and unborn children, "No one's story, no one's account of grief or sorrow or relief is questioned or held to account." That is the value of this book—each individual story given its space, its sorrow. Field describes feeling about her body the way one feels about the "intersection of a highway where a fatality has happened."

One of the only shortcomings of this collection is that almost all the writers appear to be educated upper-middle class and most probably white. There are also very few expressions of anger, which would seem to be a natural response to the pain of a miscarriage. And for readers particularly interested in the Jewish angle, there is already a book which deals with a Jewish ritual response to infertility and miscarriage, Rabbi Nina Beth

No Scripts for Miscarriage

About What Was Lost (Plume, \$15.00) collects responses to miscarriage that were generally left unsaid by earlier generations of women. The introduction by editor and contributor **Jessica Berger Gross** traces the genesis of this volume to her search for other voices with which she could identify in the aftermath of her own miscarriage in her first trimester of pregnancy. "I've always found a particular kind of comfort in reading, so as I began to think more about these questions it was only natural that I would search my favorite bookstores.... I'd hoped to return home with an armload of books, but instead I came away with an idea for a book of my own." Gross as writer and editor has taken her emptiness and made something full, and meaningful and honest of it—a process that will probably be familiar to those at home with Jewish ritual.

One of the most compelling essays here is "I Went Out Full." The title is an allusion to a verse about Naomi from

Cardin's *Tears of Sorrow, Tears of Hope: A New Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy*. Nonetheless, this collection gives us an intimate glimpse at how we grieve and how we ultimately begin anew.

BETH KISSILEFF

Hélène Cixous: Post-Colonial Jew

Hélène Cixous, French writer, philosopher, feminist and activist, is best-known in the United States for *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), a feminist manifesto about feminine writing ("écriture féminine"), where she lays out the foundations for a form of writing liberated from the constraints of masculine logic. In France, however, she is a more controversial figure, a kind of French Susan Sontag, who, as a radical academic, founded an interdisciplinary program devoted to researching sexual difference.

In one of her two most recently translated works, *Reveries of the Wild Woman*,

Primal Scenes (Northwestern, \$17.95), Cixous presents a deeply evocative autobiographical account of her years growing up Jewish in Algeria. In this precise and graceful translation by Beverley Bie Brahic, Cixous describes her native Algeria as a place she knows intimately from her formative years. Set between the Vichy regime in the early 1940s and the Algerian War of Independence in the 1960s, this book offers an eloquent meditation on post-colonial identity and gender.

Born to an Algerian-French father and a German mother, both Jews, Hélène Cixous was excluded from feeling Algerian (i.e., Muslim) and hence was often considered by the native Algerian population as an accomplice of the French colonizers. Yet, being Jewish, she didn't feel fully French either, and neither did the French make her feel as one of them. She was "in-between," neither here nor there, sensing in very deconstructionist fashion (philosopher Jacques Derrida's

influence on Cixous is well documented) that she was "being possessed by a feeling of dispossession." This plays itself out, for instance, in the memory of the Bike (always capitalized) that Cixous waits four years for her mother to buy for her and her brother. When their mother finally does, she gets it wrong: instead of getting a unisex Bike, "a Bike to share" she gets, to her son's dismay, a girl's bike. And at that point, she is no longer interested anyway, and the bike is used exclusively by her brother in his explorations of Algerian soil. Narrated in a tone that dangles playfully between comedy and tragedy, the trauma also facetiously known as "l'affaire du Vélo" (the Bike affair), is both seen through the eyes of Cixous as a child and simultaneously analyzed in the voice of the adult writer. Cixous's longing for the Bike points to the theme of absence that permeates this novel, and serves as a subtle metaphor for the annulment of the self that results from colonization.

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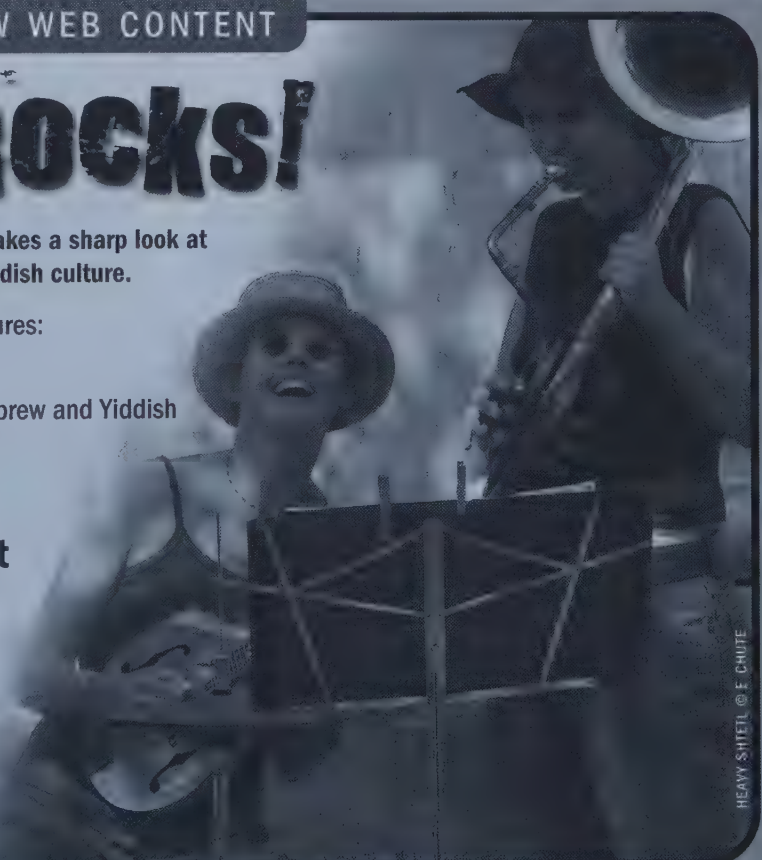
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HEAVY SHOT © E. CHUTE

How then to fill the gaps, or the “phantomization” as Hélène Cixous calls it, at the core of her “identity,” a word she seems to avoid? In the opening pages, the narrative offers the only possible redemption, described in religious terms: Writing transpires as the sole creator of meaning. Yet even this proves elusive, as the book closes with the narrator sitting down to write and picking up where she left off as she goes back to the same opening lines of the beginning: “The whole time I was living in Algeria I would dream one day of arriving in Algeria.” It is as if she is suggesting that whatever existed in between the beginning and the end of the narrative was just a parenthesis and had instantly been annulled. Yet between that first and last word, Hélène Cixous gives the reader a rich, complex and poetic example of her command of language.

Language is also at the heart of *The Day I Wasn't There*, also translated by Beverley Bie Brahic (Northwestern, \$19.95), another autobiographical narrative, in which Cixous's narrator revisits the death of her Down Syndrome child 40 years earlier, a child she had given over to her mother's care when she left Algeria after high school to study in Paris. Here, though, writing is a sublimation of the deficiencies of motherhood rather than of the blanks left by exile. The meditation on motherhood forks into a reflection on Cixous's relationship with her mother, whose bond with Omi, her own mother, is in turn considered. Finally, motherhood is analyzed in the wider context of Algerian society where having a child (preferably a boy) is like the payment of a debt to the husband, and not having one is equated with failure. But the baby with Down Syndrome is also a way for Hélène Cixous to present herself as a free woman, a woman without debt.

The investigation into the causes of Cixous's baby's death becomes a story within a story, one version told by the mother and another one by the brother, culminating in a final revelation both unbearable and somehow unclear. The repetitions and meanderings of this luminous text serve as charms, the only things able to ward off guilt and pain. They

suggest that beyond the sentence, beyond the words, beyond the ink, it is Cixous's ability to become a mother that is slowly, slowly, being delivered.

YAËLLE AZAGURY

Coincidentally, in Poland

A Day of Small Beginnings (Little, Brown, \$24.99) by **Lisa Pearl Rosenbaum** is an intergenerational saga which takes the reader back and forth from Poland to America to Poland again, on the wings of a lost soul. The story begins in Poland in 1906, when a young Jewish boy, Itzik Leiber, defends a group of Jewish children from a violent Polish peasant. Fleeing the angry townspeople of Zokof, he takes refuge in the town's cemetery, where the spirit of a childless and incongruously scholarly woman, Freidl, becomes his protector, sending him to America. Freidl finds she cannot return to her grave, and is doomed to wander with the evolving story of Itzik and his family.

A generation later, Itzik is dead in a cemetery in Queens, after a life spent actively disavowing his Judaism in the manner of the wicked son in the Passover story. His son, Nathan Linden, has Americanized both his name and his life, shedding all aspects of Judaism. By coincidence (the book argues, explicitly and implicitly, that nothing that transpires within it is truly coincidence), Linden is invited to Poland to give a lecture, and—again by coincidence—decides on a lark to travel to Zokof, the town that was once his father's home. Knowing nothing of his family's history, the erudite Harvard legal scholar is transformed into the simple son by his introduction to Rafael Bergson, Zokof's one remaining Jew. Bergson has links to Linden's past, his present with Freidl (who haunts Linden's dreams), and, years later, his

future, when Ellen Linden, Nathan's daughter, comes to Poland on a choreography fellowship. Ellen, who is patently the child who does not even know how to ask, is the one in whom the lessons of the past come to fruition.

Rosenbaum writes with affection for her characters, but the plot of her novel is not without holes. The ardent belief that anything ostensibly coincidental is, in actuality, the gestures of an inscrutable fate, or *besbert*, is more compelling in life than it is in a novel, where it can seem to be simply a contrivance of the author. Additionally, Freidl's resolution seems somehow incomplete, which seems an injustice, given how much the reader has invested in her generations of trans-Atlantic journeys. But, as the book would have it, perhaps that is how stories end: not with a denouement, but with a series of small beginnings.

J.H.

How Do People Connect?

Lore Segal's *Shakespeare's Kitchen* (New Press, \$22.95) revisits many themes from the author's previous novels. The immigrant experience, the joys of language and the difficulties of communication all find new and powerful expression in the 13 interrelated stories in Segal's long-awaited third work of adult fiction (she is also the author of the popular children's tales *Tell Me a Mitzi*).

The stories here follow Ilka Weisz as she accepts a position at the Concordance Institute, a think tank in Connecticut. Ilka is obviously connected to Ilka Weissnix, the protagonist of Segal's novel *Her First American*, but *Shakespeare's Kitchen* universalizes aspects of the European immigrant experience. Like Segal herself, who at the age of 10 was rescued from Vienna on the Kindertransport, both Ilkas fled Nazi Europe as children. However, Ilka

Ilka searches for “elective cousins,” because she is “low on the kind one has by blood.”

Weisz's Viennese roots are downplayed; she is not emigrating from Europe to American; rather, she is a "refugee from New York" who moves to Concordance. Ilka's search for "elective cousins" because she is "low on the kind one has by blood" serves simultaneously as a metaphor for the immigrant's struggle to regain lost friends and relatives and the universal human need for community.

In the author's note, Segal places "our need not only for family and sexual love and friendship but for a 'set' to belong to: the circle made of friends, acquaintances, and the people one knows," as the main theme of her book. Indeed, Ilka's sexual life and her family play second-fiddle to her Concordance "set"—a community that revolves around the eponymous Shakespeares: Leslie Shakespeare, the director of the Institute, and his wife, Eliza. Segal is most interested in how such sets are formed—how people meet and how they become intimates.

The importance of language and talking unites the stories. Ilka falls in love with the conversations that take place in the Shakespeares' kitchen, and the Shakespeares are taken by the theories and observations Ilka contributes. But even language is sometimes undermined. In "Reverse Bug," one of the most affecting stories in the collection and winner of the O. Henry prize, the institute's Genocide Project Symposium is interrupted by the sound of human screams, which have been built into the acoustic wiring of the theater. All members of the Concordance community are forced to hear the sounds of torture they know to be happening 24 hours a day out of their earshot. Both Ilka and Paulino, a Concordance student who is the son of a Nazi, claim that the screams belong to their fathers.

The incessant howling recurs in a number of the stories. Segal is powerful in describing this breakdown of words as it

plays out, for instance, in the pain of a family member's disappearance. Along with a rich and psychologically astute exploration of the dynamics of friendship, *Shakespeare's Kitchen* also provides a poignant juxtaposition of articulate communication and the wounded, raging scream that haunts us long after we turn the last page.

TAMAR WEINSTOCK

In Her Mother's Absence

The Border of Truth, an ambitious new novel by **Victoria Redel**, is an intricately woven tale of truth and deception and the ever-shifting border between them.

The book tells the story of Sara Leader and her father, Richard (once known as Itzak). Sara's narrative is set in Manhattan in 2003, while her father's account is told via letters he wrote while awaiting entry to the United States in 1940. Through this piquant correspondence—and with the help of Redel's rich prose—the reader



Tamar Yellin has just been awarded the first annual Sami Rohr prize in literature for her debut novel, of *The Genizah at the House of Shepherd*, published by Toby Press. The prize, which will be given for fiction and non-fiction in alternating years, was presented in New York City this May; it carries a \$100,000 award. Yellin emailed Lilith from her home in Yorkshire, England.

"I first conceived the novel when I went back to Jerusalem in 1987 to see my grandparents' house for the last time before its demolition. In the attic we discovered an enormous family archive: letters, newspapers and diaries. As I sat surrounded by the relics of my family history I thought of a story which would span four generations and range from England to Jerusalem, Lithuania and Azerbaijan. It would be a thriller about the search for the true text of the Bible and an exploration of Jewish belonging and identity. Shulamit, the heroine, is a Bible scholar. She's an independent woman and she has no children. Her experience of being a woman is very different from the family-centered, domesticated life of her grandmother and great-grandmother. That is her freedom; it is also a source of her loneliness and dislocation. Shulamit is looking for a way of being free and rooted at the same time.

"Success usually looks like it came overnight, but it's actually been a very long journey getting here. My novel took fifteen years to evolve, from the writing of the first sentence to the day of publication. Finding a publisher took nearly three years. It was rejected twice over by most of the major London houses. Winning the Sami Rohr Prize has been a huge boost for my career. I hope it is going to do the same for many more emerging Jewish writers, male and female."

becomes privy to the boy's previous life and the fascinating and tragic details of his family's attempts to flee a Europe in turmoil, on the cusp of the Second World War. Sara has never been party to the particulars of her father's history; he guarded his secrets scrupulously over many years. But as the book gains momentum, a series of events set off by a chance encounter launches Sara's search for her father's past and, in turn, her own present and future.

Father and daughter have been protecting each other and themselves from the truth for decades; disclosure, they both believe, is tantamount to pain, which neither can bear to inflict on the other. Tellingly, when Sara, who is moving through the process of adopting a child, thinks of being a parent, "she mostly imagines herself as a protective father," the only type of parent figure she knows.

The book's power lies in the father's tale and the underlying story of Sara's relationship with her mother, who died

when the girl was 11. Much of Sara's personality is clearly formed (or unformed) by the absence of a mother. Repeatedly, "it's her mother's insistent bravery and her absolute honesty during the dying that keeps rising up in Sara, waiting to be found." Amid all the secrets, her mother's voice is genuine and commanding.

Numerous strands weave together in this broad tapestry of a novel, and occasionally some begin to unravel while others distract. We want to know more about Sara's love life, her desire to adopt, and the many years between Itzak's arrival in the U.S. and the present.

The Border of Truth is not traditional "Holocaust lit"; the events surrounding the war are used as catalyst and background more than as the focal point. But the ramifications of survival, which is a germinal Holocaust theme, resonate throughout this novel, making it a classic yet original story of refuge, loss, guilt and redemption.

A.Z. COHN

Love & Politics, in Israel

If You Awaken Love (translated from Hebrew by David Hazony, Toby Press, \$14.95) is a stunning debut by **Emuna Elon**, the author of several children's books and short stories, and the wife of Knesset Member Benny Elon. The protagonist and narrator, Shlomtzion Dore, takes the reader along with her as she muses on the strange happenings in her life. At first we think she is presenting a one-on-one discourse with her daughter Maya, then one with Yair, the love of her life; soon we realize that she is rewinding the events in her own mind, sort of peeling the onion, in an attempt to find resolution and peace.

When the book opens, Shlomtzion is a secular successful interior designer in Tel Aviv. She is the daughter of the pompous Professor Avraham Dror of the Hebrew University Biblical Studies department, a philanderer who kept her mother in a con-

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The Posen Project for the study of secular Jewish history and cultures is pleased to announce the 2007-08 recipients. Each will receive \$50,000 per year, for up to three years, towards new courses of study.

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dition of near servitude. She has to look to the memories of her grandmother Rochel for the love that didn't come from home.

Shlomtzion's life was shattered a generation earlier when, as an intensely religious girl (a lifestyle she chose on her own) living in Jerusalem, her "intended" Yair, on the advice of the head of his yeshiva, refused to marry her. The effect was devastating "Since then, to this very day, I have not enjoyed a single moment of joy, nor a moment of inner peace, nor a moment without burning injury of your having rejected me."

In their teens Shlomtzion and Yair were involved in fervent study, *mitzvot* (good deeds) and much contemplation. The window onto yeshiva life and study is riveting. Shlomtzion is revolted by the material world; Yair brings her to the yeshiva, now empty of students, and shows her in a volume called *Lights* that the great Rabbi Kook, former chief rabbi of Israel, had similar thoughts. "When the soul yearns for the clearer light, then the world becomes reviled in its eyes. It expands and grows so much into the world's limited expanse, that the whole world, with all its material and spiritual treasures, seems to it like merely a house of anguish, its air no longer breathable."

What prompts all the soul-searching in the present? Maya, the daughter of Shlomtzion's short-lived marriage, who has become religious, comes home to Tel Aviv and tells her mother that she is to be married to the son of the now Rabbi Yair Berman. Shlomtzion now has a mirror image to contemplate. "Is it really true that one can never escape the wretchedness dictated by heredity? Must fate really always come around and strike in each and every generation?" She now must confront her former love to plan the wedding and try to work through the mistakes of her life, including those with her father and with God. From the Six Day War to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Emuna Elon writes more than a love story: the political, social and religious atmosphere in Israel is integrated into her narrative.

MOLLY ABRAMOWITZ

OUR REVIEWERS:

MOLLY ABRAMOWITZ is a writer and reviewer dividing her time between Silver Spring, MD and Jerusalem.

YAËLLE AZAGURY is a lecturer in French at Barnard College, where she researches North African Francophone literature.

A.Z. COHN is a writer who lives in Israel.

JORDANA HORN is a lawyer and journalist at work on her first novel.

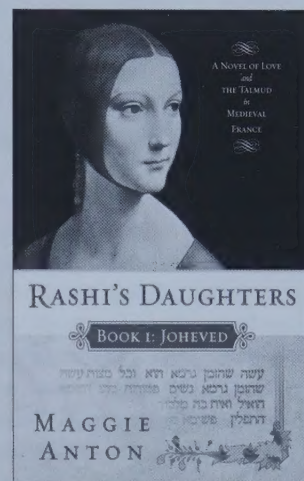
BETH KISSILEFF is completing her first novel, *Questioning Return*. She has taught Bible and English literature and has a PhD in comparative literature.

RAHEL LERNER is a book editor in New York City.

MYRA SKLAREW is the author of poetry, fiction and nonfiction, most recently *The Witness Trees* and *Lithuania: New & Selected Poems*. A research study, *Holocaust and the Construction of Memory*, is forthcoming from SUNY Press.

TAMAR WEINSTOCK, a former Lilith intern, is a student at Cornell University.

Life, Love and the Talmud in Medieval France



"A compelling combination of drama, suspense, and romance."

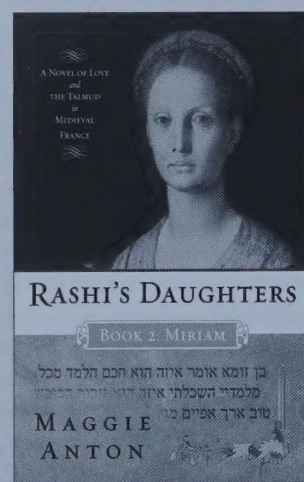
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From Louise Silk, author of *The Quilting Path*

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—*Library Journal*, starred review



Plume

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RUTH WEISBERG UNFURLED looks back through 30 years of paintings and drawings by the Los Angeles artist, with its centerpiece her 94-foot long "Scroll." Her works synthesize personal experiences, lifecycle events, biblical motifs, Jewish history and rabbinic legends. "Scroll" includes portraits of a female rabbi and a girl's bat mitzvah ceremony. Through July 29, at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. 310-440-4500. skirball.org

HOW A LEGEND HAPPENS See self-portraits, small-scale wood objects, and room-size installations by Ukrainian-born artist Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), plus video interviews with artists influenced by this towering figure, recognized during her lifetime as one of America's most innovative sculptors. "Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend" is at The Jewish Museum in New York through September 16, and from October 27 thru January 13, 2008 at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Curated by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the exhibit has a full

color catalog from Yale University Press and the Jewish Museum. thejewishmuseum.org

ITA ABER. Flexible bra wires used in "Underwires are a Pain" and a T-shirt made of teabags express the philosophy of life and humor of this Montreal-born artist, a textile conservator and historian. A retrospective exhibit of 75 of Aber's fiber art works celebrates 60 years of creativity and include a woman's tallit, ark curtains, a Torah mantle, a Simchat Torah flag and decorative textiles that depict Biblical scenes, Hebrew letters, and ancient Jewish and Chinese symbols. Through October 14 at Yeshiva University Museum. yumuseum.org

PERSIMMON TREE is a new independent online magazine featuring women over 60. Nan Fink is the editor, and the first issue, March 2007, has fiction by Esther Broner, Marilyn French, and Jane Lazarre; nonfiction by Sandy Boucher and Daphne Muse; Ruth Stone's poetry; and photography by Melanie Manchot. You can submit your own previously unpublished short fiction, novel excerpts, performance pieces, and nonfiction under 5,000 words. persimmontree.org.

THE CORETTA SCOTT KING FOREST. 10,000 trees will be planted in Israel's northern Galilee as a living memorial to King's legacy of peace and justice. This Jew-

ish National Fund project includes among its partners African-American churches in the United States, and aims to strengthen ties between African-Americans and Jews forged during the early Civil Rights Movement. jnf.org/king

LAMENTATION AND LYRICISM; A DIALECTIC OF "IMPUDENCE AND FINGER-POINTING" are some of the associations evoked by the term *Yiddishkayt*. Poetry in English, translations from Yiddish and Hebrew, and prose by writers Susan Aizenberg, Karen Alkalay-Gut, Celia Dropkin, Marcia Falk, Marilyn Hacker, Kathryn Hellerstein, Nany Himel, Lisa Katz, Berta Kling, Maxine Kumin, Erika Meitner, Alicia Ostriker, Marge Piercy, Sharon Pomerantz, Enid Shomer, and others are included in "Yiddishkayt: Poetry and Prose" a special issue of *Prairie Schooner*, Spring 2007, \$9 from University of Nebraska Press, nebraskapress.unl.edu.

JEWISH WOMEN AND POSTWAR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, 1945–1982, a new initiative of the online journal *Women and Social Movements in the U.S.*, 1600–2000, will build upon the website's current offerings, which include projects on women who are Protestant, Native American, African-American, Jewish and Catholic. Do you have information on the ways Jewish women's experiences shaped how they participated in both the Jewish community and the larger American society? Potential topics

BESTE ALLER FRAUEN, BEST OF ALL WOMEN: THE FEMALE DIMENSION IN JUDAISM, an exhibit, offers little known details about interesting and resourceful European Jewish women such as Emilie Bach, one of the early businesswomen of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Bertha Pappenheim, feminist and welfare activist who offered shelter in her home to Jewish girls from Eastern Europe who were the victims of trafficking, as well as Regina Jonas, in 1936, the first woman rabbi in Germany. Included are photos and artifacts—such as a Torah curtain (*parokhet*) donated by Zwi Hirsch Todesco to the Vienna City Temple in 1833, made from his daughter Nina's wedding dress—that reflect the role of Jewish women in a religious, economic social and cultural context. Through November 18 at the Jewish Museum Vienna. jmw.at





of Jewish
women to

could include: civil rights; second wave feminism; radical feminism; the Red scare; the wars (Korea, Vietnam, etc.); the “Feminine Mystique”; comparative collaborations with non-Jewish women; voluntary organizations; religious life; suburbia; Zionism; education; lesbian rights. In other words, everything. View examples of document projects at womhist.alexanderstreet.com Send proposals to the editors of the project, Shira Kohn, shiram19@aol.com; Rachel Kranson, rachel@honksandsirens.com; or Kathleen Laughlin, Kathleen.Laughlin@metrostate.edu.

REMEMBERING OLD BUKHARA



As the Jews of this vibrant, colorful stronghold along the Silk Road prepared to emigrate to Israel and America (to Queens) in the 1980s, photographer Joan Roth, known for capturing the rich variety of Jewish

women’s experience, culture and search for identity throughout the world, documented their daily life and traditions, as lived during their last days there. An exhibition of her photographs (some of which appeared in her book *Jewish Women: A New World of Tradition and Change*) is presented by the American Sephardi Federation with Sephardic House, at the Center for Jewish History, New York City, through October 2007. Video footage of the legendary folksinger Tofahon,



ia Gedola” of the Agudas
women’s conference,
a 1929

shot by Roth, will play continuously as part of the exhibition. cjh.org

GATEWAY TO HEAVEN

by Anat Vovnoboy is a portrait in film of the city of Hebron, seen through two artists and some children who live there as part of the small enclave of Jewish settlers among the city’s 150,000 Palestinians. Vovnoboy, 25, who emigrated from Russia to Israel in 1991, made the short documentary, which won a “Dusty” award as her thesis at New York’s School of Visual Arts BFA program. anatvov@yahoo.com

SECULAR CULTURE AND IDEAS

A new online journal funded by the Posen foundation and hosted at the Jewish book website jbooks.com takes a sharp look at secular Jewish life, culture, and ideas. In a recent issue you can read Rebecca Phillips interview with Lilith’s editor in chief, Susan Weidman Schneider, “Three Decades of Feminism.” jbooks.com/secularculture/Phillips.htm

SPOTS OF LIGHT: TO BE A WOMAN IN THE HOLOCAUST

A new exhibit at Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, gives voice to particular experiences of the millions of women who were targeted, pursued, abused and murdered by the Nazis in their attempt to thwart the rise of future generations of Jews. At that time Jewish women in Europe inhabited a largely conservative and patriarchal society. In place of external leadership roles, Jewish women assumed roles calling for the “affirmation of life”: the attempt to survive and keep others alive, in whatever situation they found themselves. Torn between dual commitments—to their families (husbands and children) and their elderly parents—they often also assumed responsibility for other needy groups, looking out for themselves in only the most extreme cases. According to curator Yehudit Inbar, the goal of this exhibit is to show the broad and diverse range of actions and responses

their devastatingly extreme circumstances. A new video art work, “To Be a Human Being,” was created specifically for the exhibit by artist Michal Rovner. The work is based on a group interview conducted with 10 Holocaust survivors during one day of filming at Yad Vashem. On view through 2007 and possibly longer. yadvashem.org.il

SPIRITUAL YOUTH FOR REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

(SYRF) led by young people, educates, organizes and empowers youth and young adults (ages 16–30) to put their faith into action and advocate for pro-choice social justice. A program of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, SYRF tries to empower youth-oriented organizations of various denominations to work with campus clergy, and provides young people with tools to advocate for choice on campuses and in high schools, congregations and communities. syrf.org

ARE YOU A MOTHER? A DAUGHTER?

Women between the ages of 18 and 100 are invited to explore their struggles and celebrations as daughters. Fill out a questionnaire with confidentiality and anonymity protected, and consider an optional personal conversation after. Clinicians at the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy, including Judith Friedman, Ella Lasky, Judi Rice, Sydney Ratner, Jaqueline Schatz and LouAnn Smith, aim to use what they learn to develop and conduct workshops and groups for daughters and mothers of daughters. Contact Roberta Estar, beltara@earthlink.com or 212-213-2635

To find out about events and projects going on in between issues if Lilith, to listen to podcasts and respond to blog posts, check the WHAT’S NEW on the Lilith homepage: www.Lilith.org. To send suggestions for this section: info@Lilith.org compiled by Naomi Danis, naomi@lilith.org

THE FRONT OF THE BUS

by FRAIDY REISS

WHERE I COME FROM, WOMEN DON'T GO TO COLLEGE.

I was raised as an ultra-Orthodox Jew. So I was expected to marry as young as possible, to have as many children as possible. To spend my life caring for my husband and children.

There's no room in that life for college or a career.

Shakespeare wrote, "To thine own self be true." But he didn't mention how hard that is to do when you're risking disappointment, disapproval, maybe even ostracism from your family.

For a while, I did what I was supposed to do. I got married at 19, became a stay-at-home mom at 20. I changed diapers and marinated chicken and tried to ignore my individuality.

But I couldn't ignore it. Finally, when I was 27, I decided I would go to Rutgers University to earn a degree in journalism. I felt I was following the lead of Rosa Parks. I was no longer willing to sit in the back of the bus.

So how did my loved ones react to my announcement that I would become the first member of my family to go to college?

It wasn't pretty.

Journalist Theodore White said, "To go against the dominant thinking of your friends, of most of the people you see every day, is perhaps the most difficult act of heroism you can perform."

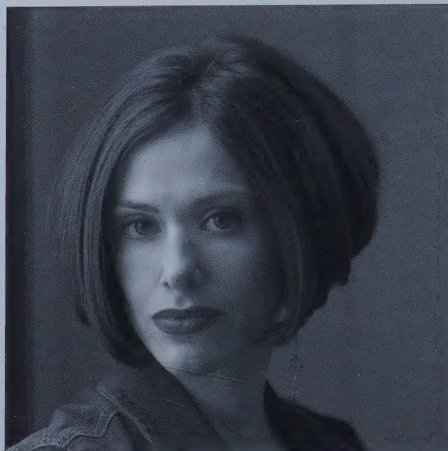
It was difficult. But I enjoyed almost every minute of my college career.

For the first time in my life, I made friends with people from outside my community. A Latina girl 10 years younger than I. A student my age who serves as a Christian youth minister. A woman with whom I talked and laughed for an hour before she realized I was Jewish—and I realized she was Palestinian.

And then we shook hands and wondered why we had been told to hate each other.

I took a class called The Arab-Israeli Conflict. One hundred students in the class, almost evenly divided between Jews and Arabs. Suddenly I was exposed to a completely different viewpoint of the conflict.

I'll never forget this one Muslim student I met in that class. She wore a headscarf, and at the time I still wore the wig that is



required of married women in ultra-Orthodox circles.

One day I said to her, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." And we went to the ladies' room and uncovered our hair. You should have seen the looks we got from the other women who walked into the room.

I got to meet my idol, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh. He came to Rutgers to give a speech, and one of my teachers brought me

over to introduce me to him. A year and a half later, I still get breathless when I remember I shook hands and chatted with Seymour Hersh.

I wrote a story about male athletes at Rutgers in one of my journalism classes that gained national media attention. I was featured in newspapers and blogs and was interviewed on radio and TV. I even got to appear on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central.

I earned college credit for interning as a reporter in the statehouse, for The Press of Atlantic City. For an aspiring reporter, that internship was the equivalent of an aspiring singer winning an audition at the Metropolitan Opera.

I am graduating today, but already I've found a job I love. I am a reporter for the Asbury Park Press, the third-largest paper in New Jersey. I cover the town of Jackson, which happens to be, geographically, the third-largest municipality in New Jersey.

My family is not here today, except for my two daughters—Chaya Sara, who's 11, and Avigial, who's 7.

Still, I have never for a moment regretted my decision to move to the front of the bus.

Author Robert Louis Stevenson said, "To know what you prefer, instead of humbly saying 'amen' to what the world tells you you ought to prefer, is to have kept your soul alive."

Today I challenge everyone here to ask yourself: Are you living your life the way you prefer? Are you keeping your soul alive?

And if the answer is no, I dare you to stop saying "amen" to the world. I dare you to be you. No matter what the consequences. ■

Fraidy Reiss delivered the 2007 student commencement address at Rutgers University, having completed her degree with honors.